NOVEMBER

Weird Tales

25c

WITCH-HOUSE

an intriguing and thrilling story about Jules de Grandin, master of the supernatural

By SEABURY QUINN

All Stories Complete

Paul Ernst
Robert Bloch
Robert E. Howard
Thorp McClusky
Bassett Morgan

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE Afghan was gazing in fearful fascination at the great stone, as a hypnotized bird stares into a serpent's eye.

"Look at it, sahib!" he whispered. "What is it? No such gem as this was ever cut by mortal hands! Look how it throbs and pulses like the heart of a cobra!"

Steve was looking, and he was aware of a strange undefined feeling of uneasiness. Well versed in the knowledge of precious stones, he had never seen a stone like this. At first glance he had supposed it to be a monster ruby, as told in the legends. Now he was not sure, and he had a nervous feeling that Yar Ali was right, that this was no natural, normal gem. He could not classify the style in which it was cut, and such was the power of its lurid radiance that he found it difficult to gaze at it closely for any length of time. The whole setting was not one calculated to soothe restless nerves. The deep dust on the floor suggested an unwholesome antiquity; the gray light evoked a sense of unreality, and the heavy black walls towered grimly, hinting at hidden things.

"Let's take the stone and go!" muttered Steve, an unaccustomed panicky dread rising in his bosom.

"Wait!" Yar Ali's eyes were blazing, and he gazed, not at the gem, but at the sullen stone walls. "We are flies in the lair of the spider! Sahib, as Allah lives, it is more than the ghosts of old fears that lurk over this city of horror! I feel the presence of peril, as I have felt it before—as I felt it in a jungle cavern where a python lurked unseen in the darkness—as I felt it in the temple of Thuggee where the hidden stranglers of Siva crouched to spring upon us—as I feel it now, tenfold!" . . .

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By Robert E. Howard

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and
MARK SCHORER

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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Witch-House

By SEABURY QUINN

A vivid, fascinating and gripping tale of the blight that fell upon a lovely and beautiful American girl—a tale of Jules de Grandin, ghost-breaker, occultist, and master of the supernatural

STREET lights were coming on and the afterglow was paling in the west beneath the first faint stars as we completed our late dinner and moved to the veranda for coffee and liqueurs. Sinking lazily into a wicker deck chair, Jules de Grandin stretched his womanishly small feet out straight before him and regarded the gleaming tips of his brightly polished calfskin pumps with every evidence of satisfaction.

"Morbleu," he murmured dreamily as he drained his demi-tasse and set his cigar glowing before he raised his tiny glass of kaiserschmarnn, "say what you will, Friend Trowbridge, I insist there is no process half so pleasant as the combination of digestion and slow poisoning by nicotine and alcohol. It is well worth going hungry to enjoy—ah, *pour l'amour d'une souris verte*, be quiet, great-mouthed one!" he broke off as the irritable stutter of the 'phone bell cut in on his philosophizing. *"Parbleu,* the miscreant who invented you was one of humankind's worst enemies!"

"Hullo, Trowbridge," hailed a voice across the wire, "this is Friebergh. Sorry to trouble you, but Greta's in bad shape. Can you come out right away?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I replied, not especially pleased at having my post-prandial breathing-spell impinged on by a country call. "What seems to be the matter?"

"I wish I knew," he answered. "She just came home from Wellesley last week, and the new house seemed to set her nerves on edge. A little while ago her mother thought she heard a noise up in her bedroom, and when she went in, there was Greta lying on the floor in some sort of fainting-fit. We don't seem able to rouse her, and——"

"All right," I interrupted, thinking regretfully of my less than half-smoked cigar, "I'll be right out. Keep her head low and loosen any tight clothing. If you can make her swallow, give her fifteen drops of aromatic ammonia in a wine-glassful of water. Don't attempt to force

● It is eleven years since the first story about Jules de Grandin appeared in WEIRD TALES—a fascinating story of weird surgery and a giant ape, called "The Horror on the Links." The hero of that bizarre story was a little French scientist and physician named Jules de Grandin—occultist and ghost-breaker, mercurial, vain, boastful, quick to wrath, yet altogether lovable—who enlisted the sympathies of the readers at once. Since then, sixty-four stories about his exploits have been printed, and Jules de Grandin has become one of the most popular heroes in modern fiction. The tale published in this issue, "Witch-House," describes one of his most amazing exploits. We commend it to you.

any liquids down her throat, though; she might strangle."

"And this Monsieur Friebergh was unable to give you any history of the casual condition of his daughter's swoon?" de Grandin asked as we drove along the Albemarle Road toward the Friebergh place at Scandia.

"No," I responded. "He said that she's just home from college and has been nervous ever since her arrival. Splendid case history, isn't it?"

"*Eh bien,* it is far from being an exhaustive one, I grant," he answered, "but if every layman understood the art of diagnosis we doctors might be forced to go to work, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

THOUGH Greta Friebergh had recovered partial consciousness when we arrived, she looked like a patient just emerging from a lingering fever. Attempts to get a statement from her met with small response, for she answered slowly, almost incoherently, and seemed to have no idea concerning the cause of

"It wasn't I reflected in that mirror. As I looked, the moonlight seemed to break and separate into a million little points of light."

her illness. Once she murmured drowsily, "Did you find the kitten? Is it all right?"

"What?" I demanded. "A kitten——"

"She's delirious, poor child," whispered Mrs. Friebergh. "Ever since I found her she's been talking of a kitten she found in the bathroom.

"I thought I heard Greta cry," she added, "and ran up here to see if she were all right. Her bedroom was deserted, but the bathroom door was open and I could hear the shower running. When I called her and received no answer I went in and found her lying on the floor. She was totally unconscious, and remained so till just a few minutes ago."

"U'm?" murmured Jules de Grandin as he made a quick inspection of the patient, then rose and stalked into the bathroom which adjoined the chamber. "Tell me, *Madame,*" he called across his shoulder, "is it customary that you leave the windows of your bathroom screenless?"

"Why, no, of course not," Mrs. Friebergh answered. "There's an opaque screen in—good gracious, it's fallen out!"

The little Frenchman turned to her with upraised brows. "Fallen, *Madame?* It was not fastened to the window-casing, then?"

"Yes, it was," she answered positively. "I saw to that myself. The carpenters attached it to the casing with two bolts, so that we could take it out and clean it, but so firmly that it could not be blown in. I can't understand——"

"No matter," he broke in. "Forgive my idle curiosity, if you please. I'm sure that Doctor Trowbridge has completed his examination, now, so we can discuss your daughter's ailment with assurance."

To me he whispered quickly as the mother left the room: "What do you make of the objective symptoms, *mon ami?* Her pulse is soft and frequent, she has a fluttering heart, her eyes are all suffused, her skin is hot and dry, her face is flushed and hectic. No ordinary fainting-fit, you'll say? No case of heat-prostration?"

"No-o," I replied as I shook my head in wonder, "there's certainly no evidence of heat-prostration. I'd be inclined to say she'd suffered an arterial hemorrhage, but there's no blood about, so——"

"Let us make a more minute examination," he ordered, and rapidly inspected Greta's face and scalp, throat, wrists and calves, but without finding so much as a pin-prick, much less a wound sufficient to cause syncope.

"Mon Dieu, but this is strange!" he muttered. "It has the queerness of the devil, this! Perhaps she bled internally, but—*ah-ha, regardez-vous, mon vieux!"*

Searching further for some sign of wound, he had unfastened her pajama jacket, and the livid spot he pointed to seemed the key which might unlock the mystery that baffled us. Against the smooth white flesh beneath the gentle swell of her left breast there showed a red and angry patch, such as might have shone had a vacuum cup been pressed some time against the skin, and in the center of the ecchymosis were four tiny punctures spaced so evenly apart that they seemed to make an almost perfect square three-quarters of an inch or so in size.

The discolored spot with its core of tiny wounds seemed insignificant to me, but the little Frenchman looked at it as though he had discovered a small, deadly reptile coiled against the girl's pale skin.

"Dieu de Dieu de Dieu de Dieu!" he murmured softly to himself. "Can such things be here, in New Jersey, in the twentieth centennial of our time?"

"What are you maundering about?" I asked him irritably. "She couldn't poi-

sibly have lost much blood through these. Why, she seems almost drained dry, yet there's not a spot of blood upon those punctures. They look to me like insect bites of some kind; even if they were wide open they're not large enough to leak a cubic centimeter of blood in half an hour."

"Blood is not entirely colloidal," he responded slowly. "It will penetrate the tissues to some slight extent, especially if sufficient suction be employed."

"But it would have required a powerful suction——"

"Précisément, and I make no doubt that such was used, my friend. Me, I do not like the look of this at all. No, certainly." Abruptly he raised his shoulders in a shrug. "We are here as physicians," he remarked. "I think a quarter-grain of morphine is indicated. After that, bed-rest and much rich food. Then, one hopes, she will achieve a good recovery."

"How is she, Trowbridge?" Olaf Friebergh asked as we joined him in the pleasant living-room. He was a compact, lean man in his late fifties, but appeared younger, and the illusion of youth was helped by the short mustache, still quite dark, the firm-cheeked, sunburned face and hazel eyes which, under clear-cut brows, had that brightness which betokens both good health and an interest in life.

"Why, there's nothing really serious the matter," I answered. "She seems quite weak, and there's something rather queer——"

"There's something queer about the whole dam' case," he cut in almost bruskly. "Greta's been on edge since the moment that she came here; nervous as a cat and jumpy and irritable as the very devil. D'ye suppose hysteria could have caused this fainting-fit?"

De Grandin eyed him speculatively a moment; then: "In just what way has Mademoiselle Greta's nervousness been noticeable, *Monsieur?"* he asked. "Your theory of hysteria has much to recommend it, but an outline of the case might help us greatly toward a diagnosis.

Friebergh stirred his highball thoughtfully a moment; then, "D'ye know about this house?" he asked irrelevantly.

"But no, *Monsieur;* what has it to do with *Mademoiselle* your daughter?"

"Just what I'm wondering," Friebergh answered. "Women are weird brutes, Doctor, all of 'em. You never know what fool tricks nerves will play on 'em. This place belonged to one of my remotest ancestors. You're probably aware that this section was originally settled by the Swedes under William Usselinx, and though the Dutch captured it in 1655 many of the Swedish settlers stayed on, not caring much who governed them as long as they were permitted to pursue their business in peace. Oscar Friebergh, my great-great-grandfather's half-brother, built this house and had his piers and warehouses down on Raritan Bay. It was from here he sent his ships to Europe and even to the Orient, and to this house he brought the girl he married late in life.

"Theirs was quite a romance. Loaded with silks and wine, the *Good Intent,* my uncle's fastest ship, put in at Portugal for a final replenishment of victuals and water before setting sail for America on the last Sunday in June, 1672. The townsfolk were making holiday, for a company of witches and wizards, duly convicted by ecclesiastical courts, had been turned over to the secular arm for execution, and a great fire had been kindled on the Monte Sao Jorge. My uncle and the master of the ship, together with several of the seamen, were curious to see what was going on, so they

ascended the hill where, surrounded by a cordon of soldiers, a perfect forest of stakes had been set up, and to each of these were tied two or three poor wretches who writhed and shrieked as the faggots round their feet took fire. The tortured outcasts' screams and the stench of burning flesh fairly sickened the Swedish sailors, and they were turning away from the accursed place to seek the clear air of the harbor when my uncle's attention was attracted to a little girl who fought desperately with the soldiers to break through to the flaming stakes. She was the daughter of a witch and a warlock who were even then roasting at the same stake, chained back to back as they were said to dance at meetings of the witches' coven. The soldiers cuffed her back good-naturedly, but a Dominican friar who stood by bade them let her through to burn, since, being of the witch-folk, her body would undoubtedly burn soon or later, just as her soul was doomed to burn eternally. The sailormen protested vigorously at this, and my uncle caught the wild girl by the wrists and drew her back to safety.

"She was a thin little thing, dressed in filthy rags, half starved, and unspeakably dirty. In her arms she clutched a draggled-looking white kitten which arched its back and fluffed its tail and spat venomously at the soldiers and the priest. But when my uncle pulled the girl to him both child and kitten ceased to struggle, as if they realized that they had found a friend. The Spanish priest ordered them away with their pitiful prize, saying she was born of the witch-people and would surely grow to witchcraft and work harm to all with whom she came in contact, but adding it was better that she work her wicked spells on Englishmen and heretics than on true children of the Church.

"My uncle lifted the child in his arms and bore her to the *Good Intent,* and the moment that he set her down upon the deck she fell upon her knees and took his hands and kissed them and thanked him for his charity in a flood of mingled Portuguese and English.

"For many days she lay like death, only occasionally jumping from her bunk and screaming, *'Padre, Madre—el fuego! el fuego!'* then falling back, hiding her face in her hands and laughing horribly. My uncle coaxed and comforted her, feeding her with his own hands and waiting on her like a nurse; so by degrees she quieted, and long before they raised the coast of Jersey off their bow she was restored to complete health and, though she still seemed sad and troubled, her temper was so sweet and her desire to please everybody so apparent that every man aboard the ship, from cabin boy to captain, was more than half in love with her.

"No one ever knew her real age. She was very small and so thin from undernourishment that she seemed more like a child than a young woman when they brought her on the *Good Intent.* None of the seamen spoke Portuguese, and her English was so slight that they could not ask her about her parents or her birthplace while she lay ill, and when she had recovered normal health it seemed her memory was gone; for though she took to English with surprizing aptitude, she seemed unable to remember anything about her former life, and for kindness' sake none would mention the *auto da fé* in which her parents perished. She didn't even know her name, apparently, so my uncle formally christened her Kristina, using the Lutheran baptismal ceremony, and for surname chose to call her Beacon as a sort of poetical commemoration of the fire from which he saved her when her parents had been burnt. It seems she——"

"My dear chap," I broke in, "this is an interesting story, I'll admit, but what possible connection can it have with——"

"Be silent, if you please, my friend," de Grandin ordered sharply. "The connection which you seek is forming like the image as the sculptor chips away the stone, or I am a far greater fool than I have reason to suspect. Say on, *Monsieur,*" he ordered Friebergh, "this story is of greater import than you realize, I think. You were informing us of the strange girl your uncle-several-times-removed had rescued from the Hounds of God in Portugal?"

Friebergh smiled appreciation of the little Frenchman's interest. "The sea air and good food, and the genuine affection with which everyone on shipboard regarded her had made a great change in the half-starved, half-mad little foundling by the time the *Good Intent* came back to Jersey," he replied. "From a scrawny little ragamuffin she had grown into a lovely, blooming girl, and there's not much doubt the townsfolk held a carnival of gossip when the *Good Intent* discharged the beautiful young woman along with her cargo of Spanish wines and French silks at the quay.

"Half the young bloods of the town were out to court her; for in addition to her beauty she was Oscar Friebergh's ward, and Oscar Friebergh was the richest man for miles around, a bachelor and well past fifty. Anyone who got Kristina for his wife would certainly have done himself a handsome favor.

"Apparently the girl had everything to recommend her, too. She was as good and modest as she was lovely, her devoutness at church service was so great it won the minister's unstinted praise, her ability as a housekeeper soon proved itself, and my uncle's house, which had been left to the casual superintendence of a cook and staff of Negro slaves, soon became one of the best kept and most orderly households in New Jersey. No one could get the better of Kristina in a bargain. When cheating tradesmen sought to take advantage of her obvious youth and probable inexperience, she would fix her great, unfathomable eyes on them, and they would flush and stammer like schoolboys caught in mischief and own their fault at once. Besides her church and household duties she seemed to have no interest but my uncle, and the young men who came wooing met with cool reception. Less than a year from the day she disembarked, the banns for her wedding to my uncle were posted on the church door, and before the gossip which her advent caused had time to cool, she was Mistress Friebergh, and assumed a leading place in the community.

"For nineteen years they lived quietly in this house, and while my uncle aged and weakened she grew into charming, mature womanhood, treating the old man with a combination of wifely and daughterly devotion, and taking over active management of his affairs when failing sight and memory rendered him incompetent."

Friebergh paused and drew reflectively at his cigar. "I don't suppose you'd know what happened in New England in 1692?" he asked de Grandin.

The Frenchman answered with a vigorous double nod. *"Parbleu,* I do, indeed, *Monsieur.* That year, in Salem, Massachusetts, there were many witchcraft trials, and——"

"Quite so," our host broke in. "Parish and the Mathers set the northern colonies afire with their witchcraft persecutions. Fortunately, not much of the contagion spread outside New England, but:

"Old Oscar Friebergh had been fail-

ing steadily, and though they cupped and leeched him and fed him mixtures of burnt toads, bezoar stone, cloves, and even moss scraped from the skull of a pirate who had been hanged in chains, he died in a coma following a violent seizure of delirium in which he cursed the day that he had taken the witch's brat to his bosom.

"Oscar had sworn his crew to secrecy concerning Kristina's origin, and it seems that they respected the vow while he lived; but some few of them, grown old and garrulous, found their memories suddenly quickened over their glasses of grog after the sexton had set the sods above old Oscar's grave, and evinced a desire to serve gossip and scandal rather than the memory of a master no longer able to reproach them for oath-breaking. There were those who recollected perfectly how the girl Kristina had passed unharmed through the flames and bid her burning parents fond farewell, then came again straight through the flames to put her hand in Oscar Friebergh's and bid him carry her beyond the seas. Others recalled how she had calmed a storm by standing at the ship's rail and reciting incantations in a language not of human origin, and still others told with bated breath how the water of baptism had scalded her as though it had been boiling when Oscar Friebergh poured it on her brow.

"The whole township knew her singing, too. When she was about her household tasks or sewing by the window, or merely sitting idly, she would sing, not loudly, but in a sort of crooning voice; yet people passing in the road before the house would pause to listen, and even children stopped their noisy play to hear her as she sang those fascinating songs in a strange tongue which the far-voyaged sailor folk had never heard and which were set to tunes the like of which were never played on flute or violin or spinet, yet for all their softness seemed to fill the air with melody as the woods are filled with bird-songs in late April. People shook their heads at recollection of those songs, remembering how witches spoke a jargon of their own, known only to each other and their master, Satan, and recalling further that the music used in praise of God was somber as befitted solemn thoughts of death and judgment and the agonies of hell.

"Her kitten caused much comment, too. The townsfolk recollected how she bore a tiny white cat beneath her arm when first she tripped ashore, and though a score of years had passed, the kitten had not grown into a cat, but still as small as when it first touched land, frisked and frolicked in the Friebergh house, and played and purred and still persisted in perpetual, supernatural youth.

"Among the villagers was a young man named Karl Pettersen, who had wooed Kristina when she first came, and took the disappointment of refusal of his marriage offer bitterly. He had married in the intervening years, but a smallpox epidemic had robbed his wife of such good looks as she originally had, and continued business failures had conspired to rob him of his patrimony and his wife's dowry as well; so when Oscar Friebergh died he held Karl's notes of hand for upward of five hundred pounds, secured by mortgages upon his goods and chattels and some farming-land which had come to him at marriage.

"When the executors of Oscar's will made inventory they found these documents which virtually made the widow mistress of the Pettersen estate, and notified the debtor that he must arrange for payment. Karl went to see Kristina late one evening, and what took place at the interview we do not know, though her servants later testified that he shrieked

and shouted and cried out as though in torment, and that she replied by laughing at his agony. However that might be, the records show that he was stricken with a fit as he disrobed for bed that night, that he frothed and foamed at the mouth like a mad dog, and made queer, growling noises in his throat. It is recorded further that he lay in semi-consciousness for several days, recovering only long enough to eat his meals, then lapsing back again into delirium. Finally, weak but fully conscious, he sat up in bed, sent for the sheriff, the minister and the magistrate, and formally denounced Kristina as a witch.

"I've said that we escaped the general horror of witch persecution which visited New England, but if old records are to be believed we made up in ferocity what we lacked in quantity. Kristina's old and influential friends were dead, the Swedish Lutheran church had been taken over by the Episcopacy and the incumbent was an Englishman whose youth had been indelibly impressed by Matthew Hopkins' witch-findings. Practically every important man in the community was a former disappointed suitor, and while they might have forgotten this, their wives did not. Moreover, while care and illness and multiple maternity had left their traces on these women, Kristina was more charmingly seductive in the ripeness of maturity than she had been in youth. What chance had she?

"She met their accusations haughtily, and refused to answer vague and rambling statements made against her. It seemed the case against her would break down for want of evidence until Karl Pettersen's wife remembered her familiar. Uncontradicted testimony showed this same small animal, still a kitten, romped and played about the house, though twenty years had passed since it first came ashore. No natural cat could live so long; nothing but a devil's imp disguised in feline shape could have retained its youth so marvelously. This, the village wise ones held, was proof sufficient that Kristina was a witch and harbored a familiar spirit. The clergyman preached a sermon on the circumstance, taking for his text the twenty-seventh verse of the twentieth chapter of Leviticus: 'A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death.'

"They held her trial on the village green. The records say she wore a shift of scarlet silk, which is all her persecutors would allow her from her wardrobe. Preliminary search had failed to find the devil's mark or witch-teat through which her familiar was supposed to nourish itself by sucking her blood; so at her own request Mistress Pettersen was appointed to the task of hunting for it *coram judice*.

She had supplied herself with pricking-pins, and at a signal from the magistrate ripped the scarlet mantle from Kristina, leaving her stark naked in the center of a ring of cruel and lustful eyes. A wave of smothering shame swept over her, and she would have raised her hands to shield her bosom from the lecherous stares of loafers congregated on the green, but her wrists were firmly bound behind her. As she bent her head in a paroxysm of mortification, the four-inch bodkin in the Pettersen woman's hand fleshed itself first in her thigh, then her side, her shoulder, her neck and her breast, and she writhed in agonizing postures as her tender flesh was stabbed now here, now there, while the rabble roared and shouted in delight.

"The theory, you know, was that at initiation into witch-hood the devil marked his new disciple with a bite, and from this spot the imp by which the witch worked her black magic drew its sustenance by sucking her blood. This

devil's mark or witch-teat was said to be insensible to pain, but as it often failed to differ in appearance from the rest of the body's surface, it was necessary for the searcher to spear and stab the witch repeatedly until a spot insensible to pain was found. The nervous system can endure a limited amount of shock, after which it takes refuge in defensive anesthesia. This seems to have been the case with poor Kristina; for after several minutes of torment she ceased to writhe and scream, and her torturer announced the mark found. It was a little area of flesh beneath the swell of her left breast, roughly square in shape and marked off by four small scars which looked like needle-wounds set about three-quarters of an inch apart.

"But the finding of the mark was inconclusive. While a witch would surely have it, an innocent person might possess something simulating it; so there remained the test of swimming. Water was supposed to reject a witch's body; so if she were tied and thrown into a pond or stream, proof of guilt was deemed established if she floated.

"They cross-tied her, making her sit tailor-fashion and binding the thumb of her right hand so tightly to the great toe of her left foot that the digits soon turned blue for lack of circulation, then doing the same with her left thumb and right great toe, after which she was bundled in a bed-sheet which was tied at the corners above her head, and the parcel was attached to a three-fathom length of rope and towed behind a rowboat for a distance of three-quarters of a mile in Raritan Bay.

"At first the air within the sheet buoyed up the bundle and its contents, and the crowd gave vent to yells of execration. 'She floats, she floats, the water will have none of her; bring the filthy witch ashore and burn her!' they shouted, but in a little while the air escaped from the wet sheet, and though Kristina sank as far down in the water as the length of rope permittted, there was no effort made to draw her up until the boat had beached. She was dead when finally they dragged her out upon the shingle.

"Karl Pettersen confessed his error and declared the devil had misled him into making a false accusation, and, her innocence proved by her drowning, Kristina was accorded Christian burial in consecrated ground, and her husband's property, in which she had a life estate, reverted to my ancestor. One of the first things he did was to sell this house, and it went through a succession of ownerships till I bought it at auction last autumn and had it reconditioned as a summer home. We found the old barn filled with household goods, and had them reconditioned, too. This furniture was once Kristina Friebergh's."

I LOOKED around the big, low-ceilinged room with interest. Old-fashioned chintz, patterned with quaint bouquets of roses, hung at the long windows. Deep chairs and sofas were covered with a warm rose-red that went well with the gray woodwork and pale green walls. A low coffee table of pear wood, waxed to a satin finish, stood before a couch; an ancient mirror framed in gilt hung against one wall, while against another stood a tall buhl cabinet and a chest of drawers of ancient Chinese nanmu wood, brown as withered oak leaves and still exhaling a subtly faint perfume. Above the open fireplace hung an ancient painting framed in a narrow strip of gold.

"That's Kristina," volunteered our host as he nodded toward the portrait.

The picture was of a woman not young, not at all old; slender, mysterious, black hair shining smoothly back, deep blue eyes holding a far-off vision, as

though they sensed the sufferings of the hidden places of the world and brooded on them; a keen, intelligent face of a clear pallor with small, straight nose, short upper lip and a mouth which would have been quite lovely had it not been so serious. She held a tiny kitten, a mere ball of white fluffiness, at her breast, and the hand supporting the small animal was the hand of one in whom the blood of ancient races ran, with long and slimly pointed fingers tipped with rosy nails. There was something to arrest attention in that face. The woman had the cold knowledge of death, ominous and ever present, on her.

"La pauvre!" de Grandin murmured as he gazed with interest at the portrait. "And what became of Monsieur Pettersen and his so highly unattractive wife?"

Friebergh laughed, almost delightedly. "History seems to parallel itself in this case," he answered. "Perhaps you've heard how the feud resulting from the Salem persecutions was resolved when descendants of accusers and accused were married? Well . . . it seems that after Kristina drowned, executors of Oscar Friebergh's will could not find clue or trace of the notes and mortgages which Pettersen had signed. Everybody had suspicions how they came to disappear, for Mistress Pettersen was among the most earnest searchers of Kristina's private papers when they sought a copy of the compact she had signed with Satan, but —in any event, Karl Pettersen began to prosper from the moment that Kristina died. Every venture which he undertook met with success. His descendants prospered, too. Two years ago the last male member of his line met Greta at a Christmas dance, and"—he broke off with a chuckle—"and they've been that way about each other from the first. I'm thinking they'll be standing side by side beneath a floral bell and saying 'I do' before the ink on their diplomas has had much chance to dry."

"All of which brings us back three centuries, and down to date—and Greta," I responded somewhat sharply. "If I remember, you'd begun to tell us something about her hysterical condition and the effect this house had on her, when you detoured to that ancient family romance."

"Précisément, Monsieur, the house," de Grandin prompted. "I think that I anticipate you, but I should like to hear your statement——" He paused with interrogatively raised brows.

"Just so," our host returned. "Greta has never heard the story of Kristina and Karl Pettersen, I'm sure, for I didn't know it very well myself till I bought this house and started digging up the ancient records. She'd certainly never been in the house, nor even seen the plans, since the work of restoration was done while she was off to school; yet the moment she arrived she went directly to her room, as if she knew the way by heart. Incidentally, her room is the same one——"

"Occupied by Madame Kristina in the olden days!" supplied de Grandin.

"Good Lord! How'd you guess?"

"I did not guess, *Monsieur,"* the little Frenchman answered levelly; "I knew."

"Humph. Well, the child has seemed to hate the place from the moment she first entered it. She's been moody and distrait, complaining of a constant feeling of malaise and troubled sleep, and most of the time she's been so irritable that there's scarcely any living with her. D'ye suppose there's something psychic in the place—something that the rest of us don't feel, that's worked upon her nerves until she had this fainting-fit tonight?"

"Not at all," I answered positively. "The child's been working hard at school, and——"

"Very likely," Jules de Grandin interrupted. "Women are more finely attuned

to such influences than men, and it is entirely possible that the tragedy these walls have witnessed has been felt subconsciously by your daughter, Monsieur Friebergh."

"DOCTOR TROWBRIDGE, I don't like this place," Greta Friebergh told me when we called on her next day. "It —there's something about it that terrifies me; makes me feel as though I were somebody else."

She raised her eyes to mine, half frightened, half wondering, and for a moment I had the eery sensation of being confronted with the suffering ghost of a girl in the flesh.

"Like someone else?" I echoed. "How d'ye mean, my dear?"

"I'm afraid I can't quite say, sir. Something queer, a kind of feeling of vague uneasiness coupled with a sort of 'I've been here before' sensation came to me the moment I stepped across the threshold. Everything, the house, the furniture, the very atmosphere, seemed to combine to oppress me. It was as if something old and infinitely evil—like the wiped-over memory of some terrifying childhood nightmare—were trying to break through to my consciousness. I kept reaching for it mentally, as one reaches for a half-remembered tune or a forgotten name; yet I seemed to realize that if I ever drew aside the veil of memory my sanity would crack. Do you understand me, Doctor?"

"I'm afraid I don't, quite, child," I answered. "You've had a trying time at school, and with your social program speeded up——"

Something like a grimace, the parody of a smile, froze upon de Grandin's face as he leant toward the girl. "Tell us, *Mademoiselle,*" he begged, "was there something more, some tangibility, which matched this feeling of malaise?"

"Yes, there was!" responded Greta.

"And that——"

"Last night I came in rather late, all tired and out of sorts. Karl Pettersen and I had been playing tennis in the afternoon, and drove over to Keyport for dinner afterward. Karl's a sweet lad, and the moonlight was simply divine on the homeward drive, but——" The quick blood stained her face and throat as she broke off her narrative.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle,* but?" de Grandin prompted.

She smiled, half bashfully, at him, and she was quite lovely when she smiled. It brightened the faintly sad expression of her mouth and raised her eyes, ever so little, at the corners. "It can't have been so long since you were young, Doctor," she returned. "What did you do on moonlight summer nights when you were alone with someone you loved terribly?"

"Morbleu," the little Frenchman chuckled, "the same as you, *petite;* no more, I think, and certainly no less!"

She smiled again, a trifle sadly, this time. "That's just the trouble," she lamented. "I couldn't."

"Hein, how is it you say, *Mademoiselle?"*

"I wanted to, Lord knows my lips were hungry and my arms were aching for him, but something seemed to come between us. It was as if I'd had a dish of food before me and hadn't eaten for a long, long time, then, just before I tasted it, a whisper came, 'It's poisoned!'

"Karl was hurt and puzzled, naturally, and I tried my best to overcome my feeling of aversion, but for a moment when his lips were pressed to mine I had a positive sensation of revulsion. I felt I couldn't bear his touch, his kisses seemed to stifle me; if he hadn't let me go I think that I'd have fainted.

"I ran right in the house when we

got home, just flinging a good-night to Karl across my shoulder, and rushed up to my room. 'Perhaps a shower will pull me out of it,' I thought, and so I started to disrobe, when——" Once more she paused, and now there was no doubt of it: the girl was terrified.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle*, and then?" the Frenchman prompted softly.

"I'd slipped my jumper and culottes off, and let down my hair, preparatory to knotting it up to fit inside my shower cap, when I chanced to look into the mirror. I hadn't turned the light on, but the moonlight slanted through the window and struck right on the glass; so I could see myself as a sort of silhouette, only"—again she paused, and her narrow nostrils dilated—"only *it wasn't I!*"

"*Sacré nom d'un fromage vert*, what is it that you tell us, *Mademoiselle?*" asked Jules de Grandin.

"It wasn't I reflected in that mirror. As I looked, the moonlight seemed to break and separate into a million little points of light, so that it was more like a mist powdered with diamond dust than a solid shaft of light; it seemed to be at once opaque yet startlingly translucent, with a sheen like that of flowing water, yet absorbing all reflections. Then suddenly, where I should have seen myself reflected in the mirror, I saw another form take shape, half veiled in the sparkling mist that seemed to fill the room, yet startlingly distinct. It was a woman, a girl, perhaps, a little older than I, but not much. She was tall and exquisitely slender, with full-blown, high-set breasts and skin as pale as ivory. Her hair was black and silken-fine and rippled down across her shoulders till it almost reached her knees, and her deep-blue eyes and lovely features held a look of such intense distress that I thought involuntarily of those horribly realistic mediæval pictures of the Crucifixion. Her shoulders were braced back, for she held her hands behind her as though they had been tied, and on her breast and throat and sides were numerous little wounds as though she had been stabbed repeatedly with something sharp and slender, and from every wound the fresh blood welled and trickled out upon the pale, smooth skin."

"She was——" began de Grandin, but the girl anticipated him.

"Yes," she told him, "she was nude. Nothing clothed her but her glorious hair and the bright blood streaming from her wounds.

"For a minute, maybe for an hour, we looked into each other's eyes, this lovely, naked girl and I, and it seemed to me that she tried desperately to tell me something, but though I saw the veins and muscles stand out on her throat with the effort that she made, no sound came from her tortured lips. Somehow, as we stood there, I felt a queer, uncanny feeling creeping over me. I seemed in some way to be identified with this other girl, and with that feeling of a loss of personality, a bitter, blinding rage seemed surging up in me. Gradually, it seemed to take some sort of form, to bend itself against a certain object, and with a start I realized that I was consumed with hatred; dreadful, crushing, killing hatred toward someone named Karl Pettersen. Not my Karl, especially, but toward everybody in the world who chanced to bear that name. It was a sort of all-inclusive hatred, something like the hatred of the Germans which your generation had in the World War. 'I can't—I won't hate Karl!' I heard myself exclaiming, and turned to face the other girl. But she was not there.

"There I stood alone in the darkened, empty room with nothing but the moonlight—ordinary moonlight, now—slanting down across the floor.

"I turned the lights on right away and

took a dose of aromatic spirits of ammonia, for my nerves were pretty badly shot. Finally I got calmed down and went into the bathroom for my shower.

"I was just about to step into the spray when I heard a little plaintive *mew* outside the window. When I crossed the room, there was the sweetest little fluffy white kitten perched on the sill outside the screen, its green eyes blinking in the light which streamed down from the ceiling-lamp and the tip of its pink tongue sticking out like the little end of thin-sliced ham you sometimes see peeping from behind the rolls in railway station sandwiches. I unhooked the screen and let the little creature in, and it snuggled up against my breast and purred and blinked its knowing eyes at me, and then put up a tiny, pink-toed paw and began to wash its face.

"'Would you like to take a shower with me, pussy?' I asked it, and it stopped its washing and looked up at me as if to ask, 'What did you say?' then stuck its little nose against my side and began to lick me. You can't imagine how its little rough tongue tickled."

"And then, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked as Greta broke off smilingly and lay back on her pillows.

"Then? Oh, there wasn't any then, sir. Next thing I knew I was in bed, with you and Doctor Trowbridge bending over me and looking as solemn and learned as a pair of owls. But the funny part of it all was that I wasn't ill at all; just too tired to answer when you spoke to me."

"And what became of this small kitten, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked.

"Mother didn't see it. I'm afraid the little thing was frightened when I fell, and jumped out of the bathroom window."

"U'm?" Jules de Grandin teased the needle-points of his mustache between a thoughtful thumb and forefinger; then: "And this so mysterious lady without clothing whom you saw reflected in your mirror, *Mademoiselle?* Could you, by any chance, identify her?"

"Of course," responded Greta, matter-of-factly as though he'd asked her if she had studied algebra at school, "she was the girl whose portrait's in the living-room downstairs, Kristina Friebergh."

"WILL you leave me in the village?" asked de Grandin as we left the Friebergh house. "I would supplement the so strange story which we heard last night by searching through the records at the church and court-house, too."

Dinner was long overdue when he returned that evening, and, intent upon his dressing, he waved my questioning aside while he shaved and took a hasty shower. Finally, when he had done justice to the salad and meringue glacé, he leant his elbows on the table, lit a cigarette and faced me with a level, serious glance.

"I have found out many things today, my friend," he told me solemnly. "Some supplement the story which Monsieur Friebergh related; some cast new light upon it; others are, I fear, disquieting.

"By example: There is a story of the little kitten of which Monsieur Friebergh told us, the kitten which refused to grow into a cat. When poor Madame Kristina was first haled before the magistrates for trial, a most careful search was made for it, but nowhere could the searchers find it; yet during the *al fresco* trial several persons saw it now here, now there, keeping just outside the range of stone-throw, but at all times present. Further, when the ban of witchcraft had apparently been lifted by Madame Kristina's inability to float and her burial within the churchyard close had been permitted, this so little kitten was seen nightly at her grave, curled up like a

patch of snow against the greenery of the growing grass. Small boys shied stones at it, and more than once the village men went to the graveyard and took shots at it, but stone and bullet both were ineffective; the small animal would raise its head and look at those who sought to harm it with a sadly thoughtful glance, then go back to its napping on the grave. Only when approached too closely would it rouse itself, and when the hunter had almost succeeded in tiptoeing close enough to strike it with a club or sword it would completely vanish, only to reappear upon the grave when, tired out with waiting, its assailant had withdrawn to a safe distance.

"Eventually the townsfolk became used to it, but no horse would pass the cemetery while it lay upon its mistress' grave without shying violently, and the most courageous of the village dogs shunned the graveyard as a place accursed. Once, indeed, a citizen took out a pair of savage mastiffs, determined to exterminate the little haunting beast, but the giant dogs, which would attack a maddened bull without a moment's hesitation, quailed and cowered from the tiny bit of fluffy fur, nor could their master's kicks and blows and insults force them past the graveyard gateway."

"Well, what's disquieting in that?" I asked. "It seems to me that if there were any sort of supernatural intervention in the case, it was more divine than diabolical. Apparently the townsfolk tried to persecute the little harmless cat to death exactly as they had its mistress. The poor thing died eventually, I suppose?"

"One wonders," he returned as he pursed his lips and blew a geometrically perfect smoke-ring.

"Wonders what?"

"Many things, *parbleu*. Especially concerning its death and its harmlessness. Attend me, if you please: For several years the small cat persisted in its nightly vigils at the grave. Then it disappeared, and people thought no more about it. One evening Sarah Spotswood, a young farmer's daughter, was passing by the graveyard, when she was accosted by a small white cat. The little creature came out in the road near where it winds within a stone's-throw of the grave of Kristina Friebergh. It was most friendly, and when she stooped to fondle it, it leaped into her arms."

He paused and blew another smoke-ring.

"Yes?" I prompted as he watched the cloudy circle sail a lazy course across the table-candles.

"Quite yes," he answered imperturbably. "Sarah Spotswood went insane within a fortnight. She died without regaining reason. Generally she was a harmless, docile imbecile, but occasionally she broke out raving in delirium. At such times she would shriek and writhe as though in torment, and bleeding wounds appeared upon her sides and breast and throat. The madhouse-keepers thought she had inflicted injury upon herself, and placed her in a straitjacket when they saw the signs of the seizure coming on. It made no difference: the wounds accompanied each spell of madness, as though they were stigmata. Also, I think it worth while mentioning, a small white kitten, unknown to anybody in the madhouse, was always observed somewhere about the place when Sarah's periods of mania came.

"HER end came tragically, too. She escaped surveillance on a summer afternoon, fled to a little near-by stream and cast herself into it. Though the water was a scant six inches deep, she lay upon her face until she died by drowning.

"Two other similar cases are recorded.

Since Sarah Spotswood died in 1750 there have been three young women similarly seized, the history of each case revealing that the maniac had taken a stray white kitten for pet shortly before the onset of incurable madness, and that in every instance the re-appearance of this kitten, or an animal just like it, had coincided with return of manic seizures. Like their predecessor, each of these unfortunate young women succeeded in drowning herself. In view of these things would you call this kitten either dead or harmless?"

"You have a theory?" I countered.

"Yes—and no," he answered enigmatically. "From such information as we have I am inclined to think the verdict rendered in Madame Kristina's witch-trial was a false one. While not an ill-intentioned one—unknowingly, indeed, perhaps—I think the lady was what we might call a witch; one who had power, whether she chose to exercise it or not, of working good or bad to fellow humans by means of supernatural agencies. It seems this little kitten which never grew to cathood, which lay in mourning on her grave and which afflicted four unfortunate young women with insanity, was her familiar—a beast-formed demon through whose aid she might accomplish magic."

"But that's too utterly absurd!" I scoffed. "Kristina Friebergh died three centuries ago, while this kitten——"

"Did not necessarily die with her," he interjected. "Indeed, my friend, there are many instances in witch-lore where the familiar has outlived its witch."

"But why should it seek out other girls——"

"*Précisément,*" he answered soberly. "That, I damn think, is most significant. Witches' imps, though they may be ambassadors from hell, are clothed in pseudo-natural bodies. Thus they have need of sustenance. This the witch supplies with her blood. It is at the insensitive spot known as the witch-mark or witch's teat that the familiar is suckled. When Monsieur Friebergh told us of Madame Kristina's trial, you will recall that he described the spot in which she felt no pain as an area roughly square in shape marked off by four small scars which looked like needle-wounds set about three-quarters of an inch apart? Consider, my friend—think carefully—where have you seen a cicatrix like that within the last few days?" His eyes, round and unwinking as those of a thoughtfully inclined tom-cat, never left mine as he asked the question.

"Why"—I temporized—"oh, it's too absurd, de Grandin!"

"You do not answer, but I see you recognize the similarity," he returned. "Those little 'needle-wounds,' *mon vieux,* were made by little kitten-teeth which pierced the white and tender skin of Mademoiselle Greta just before she swooned. She exhibited the signs of hemorrhage, that you will agree; yet we found no blood. *Pourquoi?* Because the little fluffy kitten which she took into her arms, the little beast which licked her with its tongue a moment before she lost consciousness, *sucked it from her body.* This cat-thing seems immortal, but it is not truly so. Once in so many years it must have sustenance, the only kind of sustenance which will enable it to mock at time, the blood of a young woman. Sarah Spotswood gave it nourishment, and lost her reason in the process, becoming, apparently, identified with the unfortunate Madame Kristina, even to showing the stigmata of the needle-wounds which that poor creature suffered at her trial. The manner of her death—by drowning—paralleled Kristina's, also, as did those of the other three who followed her in madness—*after*

having been accosted by a small white kitten."

"Then what d'ye suggest?" I asked him somewhat irritably, but the cachinnation of the telephone cut in upon the question.

"Good Lord!" I told him as I hung up the receiver. "Now it's young Karl Pettersen! His mother 'phoned to tell me he's been hurt, and——"

"Right away, at once; immediately," he broke in. "Let us hasten to him with all speed. Unless I make a sad mistake, his is no ordinary hurt, but one which casts a challenge in our faces. Yes, assuredly!"

I DO not think I ever saw a man more utterly unstrung than young Karl Pettersen. His injury was trivial, amounting to scarcely more than a briar-scratch across his throat, but the agony of grief and horror showing in his face was truly pitiful, and when we asked him how the accident occurred his only answer was a wild-eyed stare and a sob-torn sentence he reiterated endlessly: "Greta, oh, Greta, how could you?"

"I think that there is something devilish here, Friend Trowbridge," whispered Jules de Grandin.

"So do I," I answered grimly. "From that wound I'd say the little fool has tried to kill himself after a puppy-lovers' quarrel. See how the cut starts underneath the condile of the jaw, and tapers off and loses depth as it nears the median line? I've seen such cuts a hundred times, and——"

"But no," he interrupted sharply. "Unless the young *Monsieur* is left-handed he would have made the cut across the left side of his throat; this wound describes a slant across the right side. It was made by someone else—someone seated on his right, as, by example, in a motorcar.

"*Monsieur!*" he seized the boy by both his shoulders and shook him roughly. "Stop this childish weeping. Your wound is but a skin-scratch. It will heal almost with one night's sleep, but its cause is of importance. How did you get it, if you please?"

"Oh, Greta——" Karl began again, but the smacking impact of de Grandin's hand against his cheek cut short his wail.

"*Nom d'un coq,* you make me to lose patience with you!" cried the Frenchman. "Here, take a dose of this!" From his jacket pocket he produced a flask of cognac, poured a liberal portion out into a cup and thrust it into Karl's unsteady hand. "Ah, so; that is better," he pronounced as the lad gulped down the liquor. "Now, take more, *mon vieux;* we need the truth, and quickly, and never have I seen a better application of the proverb that in alcohol dwells truth."

Within five minutes he had forced the better portion of a pint of brandy down the young man's throat, and as the potent draft began to work, his incoherent babbling gave way to a melancholy but considered gravity which in other circumstances would have appeared comic.

"Now, man to man, *compagnon de débauche,* inform us what took place," the Frenchman ordered solemnly.

"Greta and I were out driving after dinner," answered Karl. "We've been nuts about each other ever since we met, and today I asked her if she'd marry me. She'd been actin' sort o' queer and distant lately, so I thought that maybe she'd been fallin' for another bird, and I'd better hurry up and get my brand on her. Catch on?"

De Grandin nodded somewhat doubtfully. "I think I apprehend your meaning," he replied, "though the language which you use is slightly strange to me. And when you had completed your proposal——"

"She didn't say a word, but just

pointed to the sky, as though she'd seen some object up there that astonished her."

"Quite so. One understands; and then?"

"Naturally, I looked up, and before I realized what was happening she slashed a penknife across my throat and jumped out of the car screaming with laughter. I wasn't very badly hurt, but——" He paused, and we could fairly see his alcoholic aplomb melt and a look of infantile distress spread on his features. "O-o-o!" he wailed disconsolately. "Greta, my dear, why did you——"

"The needle, if you please, Friend Trowbridge," Jules de Grandin whispered. "There is nothing further to be learned, and the opiate will give him merciful oblivion. Half a grain of morphine should be more than ample."

"THIS is positively the craziest piece of business I ever heard of!" I exclaimed as we left the house. "Only the other night she told us that she loved the lad so much that her heart ached with it; this afternoon she interrupts his declaration by slashing at his throat. I never heard of anything so utterly fantastic——"

"Except, perhaps, the case of Sarah Spotswood and the other three unfortunates who followed her to madness and the grave?" he interrupted in a level voice. "I grant the little *demoiselle* has acted in a most demented manner. *Ha*, but is she crazier than——"

"Oh, for the love of mercy, stop it!" I commanded querulously. "Those cases were most likely mere coincidences. There's not a grain of proof——"

"If a thing exists we must believe it, whether it is susceptible of proof or not," he told me seriously. "As for coincidence —had only one girl graduated into death from madness after encountering a kitten such as that which figures in each of these occurrences, we might apply the term; but when three young women are so similarly stricken, *parbleu*, to fall back on coincidence is but to shut your eyes against the facts, *mon vieux*. One case, yes; two cases, perhaps; three cases—*non*, it is to pull the long arm of coincidence completely out of joint, by blue!"

"Oh, well," I answered wearily, "if you—good Lord!"

Driven at road-burning speed a small, light car with no lamps burning came careening crazily around the elbow of the highway, missed our left fender by a hair and whizzed past us like a bullet from a rifle.

"Is it any wonder our insurance rates are high with idiots like that out upon the public roads?" I stuttered, inarticulate with fury, but the whining signal of a motorcycle's siren cut my protest short as a state policeman catapulted around the bend in hot pursuit of the wild driver.

"D'ye see um?" he inquired as he stopped beside us with a scream of brakes. "Which way did 'e go?"

"Took the turn to the right," I answered. "Running like a streak with no lights going, and——"

"My friend mistakes," de Grandin interrupted as he smiled at the policeman; "the wild one turned abruptly to the left, and should be nearly to the village by this time."

"Why, I'm positive he took the right-hand turn——" I began, when a vicious kick upon my shin served notice that de Grandin wished deliberately to send the trooper on a wild-goose chase. Accordingly: "Perhaps I was mistaken," I amended lamely; then, as the officer set out:

"What was your idea in that?" I asked.

"The speeder whom the gendarme followed was Mademoiselle Greta," he replied. "I recognized her in our head-

lights' flash as she went by, and I suggest we follow her."

"Perhaps we'd better," I conceded; "driving as she was, she's likely to end up in a ditch before she reaches home."

"WHY, Greta's not been out tonight," said Mrs. Friebergh when we reached the house. "She went out walking in the afternoon and came home shortly after dinner and went directly to her room. I'm sure she's sleeping."

"But may we see her anyway, *Madame?*" de Grandin asked. "If she sleeps we shall not waken her."

"Of course," the mother answered as she led the way upstairs.

It was dark and quiet as a tomb in Greta's bedroom, and when we switched on the night-light we saw her sleeping peacefully, her head turned from us, the bedclothes drawn up close about her chin.

"You see, the poor, dear child's exhausted," Mrs. Friebergh said as she paused upon the threshold.

De Grandin nodded acquiescence as he tiptoed to the bed and bent an ear above the sleeping girl. For a moment he leant forward; then, "I regret that we should so intrude, *Madame,*" he apologized, "but in cases such as this——" An eloquently non-committal shrug completed the unfinished sentence.

Outside, he ordered in a sharp-edged whisper: "This way, my friend, here, beneath this arbor!" In the vine-draped pergola which spanned the driveway running past the house, he pointed to a little single-seated roadster. "You recognize him?" he demanded.

"Well, it *looks* like the car that passed us on the road——"

"Feel him!" he commanded, taking my hand in his and pressing it against the radiator top.

I drew away with a suppressed ejaculation. The metal was hot as a teakettle full of boiling water.

"Not only that, *mon vieux,*" he added as we turned away; "when I pretended to be counting Mademoiselle Greta's respiration I took occasion to turn back the covers of her bed. She was asleep, but most curiously, she was also fully dressed, even to her shoes. Her window was wide open, and a far less active one than she could climb from it to earth and back again."

"Then you think——"

"*Non, non,* I do not think; I wish I did; I merely speculate, my friend. Her mother told us that she went out walking in the afternoon. That is what she thought. Plainly, that is what she was meant to think. Mademoiselle Greta walked out, met the young Monsieur Pettersen and drove with him, cut him with her ninety-six times cursed knife, then leaped from his car and walked back home. Anon, when all the house was quiet, she clambered from her window, drove away upon some secret errand, then returned in haste, re-entered her room as she had left it, and"—he pursed his lips and raised his shoulders in a shrug—"there we are, my friend, but just where is it that we are, I ask to know."

"On our way to home and bed," I answered with a laugh. "After all this mystery and nonsense, I'm about ready for a drink and several hours' sleep."

"An excellent idea," he nodded, "but I should like to stop a moment at the cemetery, if you will be so kind. I desire to see if what I damn suspect is true."

Fifteen minutes' drive sufficed to bring us to the lich-gate of the ancient burying-ground where generations of the county's founders slept. Unerringly he led the way between the sentinel tomb-

stones till, a little distance from the ivy-mantled wall which bordered on the highway, he pointed to a moss-grown marker.

"There is Madame Kristina's tomb," he told me in a whisper. "It was there—by blue! Behold, my friend!"

Following his indicating finger's line I saw a little spot of white against the mossy grass about the tombstone's base, and even as I looked, the little patch of lightness moved, took shape, and showed itself a small, white, fluffy kitten. The tiny animal uncoiled itself, raised to a sitting posture, and regarded us with round and shining eyes.

"Why, the poor little thing!" I began, advancing toward it with extended hand. "It's lost, de Grandin——"

"*Pardieu,* I think that it is quite at home," he interrupted as he stooped and snatched a piece of gravel from the grave beneath his feet. "*Regardez, s'il vous plait!*"

In all the years I'd known him I had never seen him do an unkind thing to woman, child or animal; so it was with something like a gasp of consternation that I saw him hurl the stone straight at the little, inoffensive kitten. But great as my surprize had been at his unwonted cruelty, it was swallowed up in sheer astonishment as I saw the stone strike through the little body, drive against the granite tombstone at its back, then bounce against the grave-turf with a muffled thud. And all the while the little cat regarded him with a fixed and slightly amused stare, making no movement to evade his missile, showing not the slightest fear at his approach.

"You see?" he asked me simply.

"I—I thought—I could have sworn ——" I stammered, and the laugh with which he greeted my discomfiture was far from mirthful.

"You saw, my friend, nor is there any reason for you to forswear the testimony of your sight," he assured me. "A hundred others have done just as I did. If all the missiles which have been directed at that small white cat-thing were gathered in a pile, I think that they would reach a tall man's height; yet never one of them has caused it to forsake its vigil on this grave. It has visited this spot at will for the past two hundred years and more, and always it has meant disaster to some girl in the vicinity. Come, let us leave it to its brooding; we have plans to make and things to do. Of course."

"*GRAND Dieu des chats, c'est l'explication terrible!*" de Grandin's exclamation called me from perusal of the morning's mail as we completed breakfast the next day.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"*Parbleu,* what is it not?" he answered as he passed a folded copy of the *Journal* to me, indicating the brief item with a well-groomed forefinger.

TREASURE HUNTERS VIOLATE THE DEAD

the headline read, followed by the short account:

Shortly after eleven o'clock last night vandals entered the home of the late Timothy McCaffrey, Argyle Road near Scandia, and stole two of the candles which were burning by his casket while he lay awaiting burial. The body was reposing in the front room of the house, and several members of the family were in the room adjoining.

Miss Monica McCaffrey, 17, daughter of the deceased, was sitting near the doorway leading to the front room where the body lay, and heard somebody softly opening the front door of the house. Thinking it was a neighbor come to pay respects to the dead, she did not rise immediately, not wishing to disturb the visitor at his devotions, but when she noticed an abrupt diminution of the light in the room in which her father's body lay, as though several of the candles had been extinguished, she rose to investigate.

As she stepped through the communicating doorway she saw what she took to be a young man in a light tan sports coat running out the front door of the house. She followed the intruder to the porch and was in time to see him jump into a small sports roadster standing by the

front gate with its engine running, and drive away at breakneck speed.

Later, questioned by state troopers, she was undetermined whether the trespasser was a man or woman, as the overcoat worn by the intruder reached from neck to knees, and she could not definitely say whether the figure wore a skirt or knickerbockers underneath the coat.

When Miss McCaffrey returned to the house she found that all the vigil lights standing by the coffin had been extinguished and two of the candles had been taken.

Police believe the act of wanton vandalism was committed by some member of the fashionable summer colony at Scandia who were engaged in a "treasure hunt," since nothing but two candles had been taken by the intruder.

"For goodness' sake!" I looked at de Grandin in blank amazement.

His eyes, wide, round and challenging, were fixed on mine unwinkingly. *"Non,"* he answered shortly, "not for goodness' sake, my friend; far from it, I assure you. The thief who stole these candles from the dead passed us on her homeward way last night."

"Her homeward way? You mean——"

"But certainly. Mademoiselle Greta wore such a coat as that *le journal* mentions. Indubitably it was she returning from her gruesome foray."

"But what could she be wanting corpse-lights for?"

"Those candles had been exorcised and blessed, my friend; they were, as one might say, spiritually antiseptic, and it was a law of the old witch covens that things stolen from the church be used to celebrate their unclean rites. All evidence points to a single horrid issue, and tonight we put it to the test."

"Tonight?"

"Précisément. This is the twenty-third of June, Midsummer's Eve. Tonight in half the world the bonfires spring in sudden flame on mountain and in valley, by rushing river and by quiet lake. In France and Norway, Hungary and Spain, Rumania and Sweden, you could see the flares stand out against the blackness of the night while people dance about them and chant charms against the powers of Evil. On Midsummer's Eve the witches and the wizards wake to power; tonight, if ever, that which menaces our little friend will manifest itself. Let us be on hand to thwart it—if we can."

"GRETA's dancing at the Country Club," said Mrs. Friebergh when we called to see our patient late that evening. "I didn't want her to go, she's seemed so feverish and nervous all day long, but she insisted she was well enough, so——"

"Precisely, *Madame,"* Jules de Grandin nodded. "It is entirely probable that she will feel no ill effects, but for precaution's sake we will look in at the dance and see how she sustains the strain of exercise."

"But I thought you said that we were going to the club," I remonstrated as he touched my arm to signal a left turn. "But we are headed toward the cemetery——"

"But naturally, my friend; there is the grave of Madame Kristina; there the small white cat-thing keeps its watch; there we must go to see the final act played to its final curtain."

He shifted the small bundle on his knees and began unfastening the knots which bound it.

"What's that?" I asked.

For answer he tore off the paper and displayed a twelve-gage shotgun, its double barrels sawed off short against the wood.

"Good Lord!" I murmured; "whatever have you brought that for?"

He smiled a trifle grimly as he answered, "To test the soundness of the advice which I bestowed upon myself this morning."

"Advice you gave yourself—good heavens, man, you're raving!"

"Perhapsly so," he grinned. "There are those who would assure you that de

Grandin's cleverness is really madness, while others will maintain his madness is but cleverness disguised. We shall know more before we grow much older, I damn think."

The air seemed thick and heavy with a brooding menace as we made our way across the mounded graves. Silence, choking as the dust of ages in a mummy-tomb, seemed to bear down on us, and the chirping of a cricket in the grass seemed as loud and sharp as the scraping of metal against metal as we picked our path between the tombstones. The stars, caught in a web of overhanging cloud, were paling in the luminance which spread from the late-rising moon, and despite myself I felt the ripple of a chill run up my back and neck. The dead had lain here quietly two hundred years and more, they were harmless, powerless, but—reason plays no part when instinct holds the reins, and my heart beat faster and my breathing quickened as we halted by the tombstone which marked Kristina Friebergh's grave.

I cannot compute the time we waited. Perhaps it was an hour, perhaps several, but I felt as though we had crouched centuries among the moon-stained shrubbery and the halftones of the purple shadows when de Grandin's fingers on my elbow brought me from my semi-dream to a sort of terrified alertness. Down by the ancient lich-gate through which ten generations of the village dead had come to their last resting-place, a shadow moved among the shadows. Now it lost itself a moment; now it stood in silhouette against the shifting highlights on the corpse-road where the laurel bushes swayed in the light breeze. Terror touched me like a blast of icy wind. I was like a little, frightened boy who finds himself deserted in the darkness.

Now a tiny spot of lightness showed against the blackened background of the night; a second spot of orange light shone out, and I descried the form of Greta Friebergh coming slowly toward us. She was dressed in red, a bright-red evening dress of pleated net with surplice sleeves and fluted hem, fitted tightly at the waistline, molding her slender, shapely hips, swirling about her toeless silver sandals. In each hand she bore a candle which licked hungrily against the shadows with its little, flickering tongue of orange flame. Just before her, at the outer fringe of candlelight, walked a little chalk-white kitten, stepping soundlessly on dainty paws, leading her unhurriedly toward the grave where Kristina Friebergh lay as a blind man's poodle might escort its master.

I would have spoken, but de Grandin's warning pressure on my arm prevented utterance as he pointed silently across the graveyard to the entrance through which Greta had just come.

Following cautiously, dodging back of tombstones, taking cover behind bushes, but keeping at an even distance from the slowly pacing girl, was another figure. At a second glance I recognized him. It was young Karl Pettersen.

Straight across the churchyard Greta marched behind her strange conductor, halted by the tombstone at the head of Kristina's grave, and set her feebly flaring candles in the earth as though upon an altar.

For a moment she stood statue-still, profiled against the moon, and I saw her fingers interlace and writhe together as if she prayed for mercy from inexorable fate; then she raised her hands, undid snap-fasteners beneath her arms and shook her body with a sort of lazy undulation, like a figure in a slowed-down motion picture, freeing herself from the scarlet evening gown and letting it fall from her.

Straight, white and slim she posed her ivory nakedness in silhouette against the moon, so still that she seemed the image of a woman rather than a thing of flesh and blood, and we saw her clasp her hands behind her, straining wrists and elbows pressed together as though they had been bound with knotted thongs, and on her features came a look of such excruciating pain that I was forcibly reminded of the pictures of the martyrs which the mediæval artists painted with such dreadful realism.

She turned and writhed as though in deadly torment, her head swayed toward one shoulder, then the other; her eyes were staring, almost starting from their sockets; her lips showed ruddy froth where she gnashed them with her teeth; and on her sides and slim, white flanks, upon her satin-gleaming shoulders, her torture-corded neck and sweetly rounded breasts, there flowered sudden spots of red, cruel, blood-marked wounds which spouted little streams of ruby fluid as though a merciless, sharp skewer probed and stabbed and pierced the tender, wincing flesh.

A wave of movement at the grave's foot drew our glance away from the tormented girl. Karl Pettersen stood there at the outer zone of candlelight, his face agleam with perspiration, eyes bright and dilated as though they had been filled with belladonna. His mouth began to twist convulsively and his hands shook in a nervous frenzy.

"Look—look," he slobbered thickly, "she's turning to the witch! She's not my Greta, but the wicked witch they killed so long ago. They're testing her to find the witch-mark; soon they'll drown her in the bay—I know the story; every fifty years the witch-cat claims another victim to go through the needle-torture, then——"

"You have right, *mon vieux*, but I damn think it has found its last one," interrupted Jules de Grandin as he rested his shotgun in the crook of his left elbow and pulled both triggers with a jerk of his right hand.

Through a smoky pompon flashed twin flares of flame, and the shotgun's bellow was drowned out by a strangling scream of agony. Yet it was not so much a cry of pain as of wild anger, maniacal, frenzied with thwarted rage. It spouted up, a marrow-freezing geyser of terrifying sound, and the kitten which had crouched at Greta's feet seemed literally to fly to pieces. Though the double charge of shotgun slugs had hit it squarely, it did not seem to me that it was ripped to shreds, but rather as though its tiny body had been filled with some form of high explosive, or a gas held at tremendous pressure, and that the penetrating slugs had liberated this and caused a detonation which annihilated every vestige of the small, white, furry form.

As the kitten vanished, Greta dropped down to the ground unconscious, and, astoundingly, as though they had been wiped away by magic, every sign of pulsing, bleeding wounds was gone, leaving her pale skin unscarred and without blemish in the faintly gleaming candlelight.

"And now, *Monsieur, s'il vous plait!*" With an agile leap de Grandin crossed the grave, drew back his sawed-off shotgun and brought its butt-plate down upon Karl's head.

"Good heavens, man, have you gone crazy?" I demanded as the youngster slumped down like a pole-axed ox.

"Not at all, by no means; otherwise, entirely, I assure you," he answered as he gazed down at his victim speculatively. "Look to *Mademoiselle*, if you will be so kind; then help me carry this one to the motorcar."

Clumsily, I drew the scarlet ballgown over Greta's shoulders, then grasped her underneath the arms, stood her on unconscious feet a moment and let the garment fall about her. She was scarcely heavier than a child, and I bore her to the car with little effort, then returned to help de Grandin with Karl Pettersen.

"What ever made you do it?" I demanded as we set out for my office.

Pleased immensely with himself, he hummed a snatch of tune before he answered: "It was expedient that he should be unconscious at this time, my friend. Undoubtlessly he followed Mademoiselle Greta from the dance, saw her light the candles and disrobe herself, then show the bleeding stigma of the witch. You heard what he cried out?"

"Yes."

"*Très bon.* They love each other, these two, but the memory of the things which he has seen tonight would come between them and their happiness like a loathsome specter. We must eliminate every vestige of that memory, and of the wound she dealt him, too. But certainly. When they recover consciousness I shall be ready for them. I shall wipe their memories clean of those unpleasant things. Assuredly; of course."

"How can you do that?"

"By hypnotism. You know I am an adept at it, and these two, exhausted, all weakened with the slowly leaving burden of unconsciousness, will offer little opposition to my will. To implant suggestions which shall ripen and bear fruit within their minds will be but child's play for me."

We drove along in silence a few minutes; then, chuckling, he announced: "*Tiens,* she is the lucky girl that Jules de Grandin is so clever. Those other ones were not so fortunate. There was no Jules de Grandin to rescue Sarah Spotswood from her fate, nor the others, either. No. The same process was beginning in this case. First came a feeling of aversion for her lover, a reluctance to embrace him. That was the will of wickedness displacing her volition. Then, all unconsciously, she struck him with a knife, but the subjugation of her will was not complete. The will of evilness forced her hand to strike the blow, but her love for him withheld it, so that he suffered but a little so small scratch."

"Do you mean to tell me Kristina Friebergh was responsible for all these goings-on?" I asked.

"No-o, I would not say it," he responded thoughtfully. "I think she was a most unfortunate young woman, more sinned against than sinning. That *sacré petit chat*—that wicked little cat-thing—was her evil genius, and that of Sarah Spotswood and the other girls, as well as Mademoiselle Greta. You remember Monsieur Friebergh's story, how his several times great-uncle found the little Kristina trying to force her way into the flames which burnt her parents, with a little kitten clutched tight in her arms? That is the explanation. Her parents were undoubtlessly convicted justly for the crime of witchcraft, and the little cat-thing was the imp by which they worked their evil spells. When they were burnt, the cat-familiar lingered on and attached itself to their poor daughter. It had no evil work to do, for there is no record that Kristina indulged in witchery. But it was a devil's imp, instinct with wickedness, and her very piety and goodness angered it; accordingly it brought her to a tragic death. Then it must find fresh source of nourishment, since witches' imps, like vampires, perpetuate themselves by sucking human blood. Accordingly it seized on Sarah Spotswood as a victim, and took her blood and sanity, finally her life. For half a century it lived on the vitality it took from that

unfortunate young woman, then—*pouf!*—another victim suffers, goes insane and dies. Each fifty years the process is repeated till at last it comes to Mademoiselle Greta—and to me. Now all is finished."

"But I saw you toss a stone at it last night without effect," I argued, "yet tonight——"

"*Précisément.* That gave me to think. 'It can make a joke of ordinary missiles,' I inform me when I saw it let the stone I threw pass through its body. 'This being so, what are we to do with it, Jules de Grandin?'

"'Phantoms and werewolves which are proof against the ordinary bullet can be killed by shots of silver,' I reply.

"'Very well, then, Jules de Grandin, I say to me; 'let us use a silver bullet.'

"'*Ha,* but this small cat-thing are an artful dodger, you might miss it,' I remind me; so I make sure there shall be no missing. From the silversmith I get some silver filings, and with these I stuff some shotgun shells. 'Now, *Monsieur le Chat,*' I say, 'if you succeed in dodging these, you will astonish me.'

"*Eh bien,* it was not I who was astonished, I damn think."

We took the children to my surgery, and while I went to seek some wine and biscuit at de Grandin's urgent request, he placed them side by side upon the couch and took his stance before them.

When I tiptoed back some fifteen minutes later, Greta lay sleeping peacefully upon the sofa, while Karl was gazing fascinated into Jules de Grandin's eyes.

". . . and you will remember nothing but that you love her and she loves you, *Monsieur,*" I heard de Grandin say, and heard the boy sigh sleepily in acquiescence.

"Why, we're in Doctor Trowbridge's surgery!" exclaimed Greta as she opened her eyes.

"But yes, of course," de Grandin answered. "You and Monsieur Karl had a little, trifling accident upon the road, and we brought you here."

"Karl dear"—for the first time she seemed to notice the scratch upon his neck—"you've been hurt!"

"*Ah bah,* it is of no importance, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin told her with a laugh. "Those injuries are of the past, and tonight the past is dead. See, we are ready to convey you home, but first"—he filled the glasses with champagne and handed them each one—"first we shall drink to your happiness and forgetfulness of all the things which happened in the bad old days."

Black Hound of Death

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A grim tale of stark horror—of the terrible disfigurement inflicted upon Adam Grimm by the dark priests of Inner Mongolia, and the frightful vengeance that pursued his enemy to the United States

1. The Killer in the Dark

EGYPTIAN darkness! The phrase is too vivid for complete comfort, suggesting not only blackness, but unseen things lurking in that blackness; things that skulk in the deep shadows and shun the light of day; slinking figures that prowl beyond the edge of normal life.

Some such thoughts flitted vaguely through my mind that night as I groped along the narrow trail that wound through the deep pinelands. Such thoughts are likely to keep company with any man who dares invade, in the night, that lonely stretch of densely timbered river-country which the black people call Egypt, for some obscurely racial reason.

There is no blackness this side of Hell's unlighted abyss as absolute as the blackness of the pine woods. The trail was but a half-guessed trace winding between walls of solid ebony. I followed it as much by the instincts of the piny woods dweller as by the guidance of the external senses. I went as hurriedly as I dared, but stealth was mingled with my haste, and my ears were whetted to knife-edge alertness. This caution did not spring from the uncanny speculations roused by the darkness and silence. I had good, material reason to be wary. Ghosts might roam the pinelands with gaping, bloody throats and cannibalistic hunger as the negroes maintained, but it was no ghost I feared. I listened for the snap of a twig under a great, splay foot, for any sound that would presage murder striking from the black shadows. The creature which, I feared, haunted Egypt was more to be dreaded than any gibbering phantom.

That morning the worst negro desperado in that part of the state had broken from the clutches of the law, leaving a ghastly toll of dead behind him. Down along the river, bloodhounds were baying through the brush and hard-eyed men with rifles were beating up the thickets.

They were seeking him in the fastnesses near the scattered black settlements, knowing that a negro seeks his own kind in his extremity. But I knew Tope Braxton better than they did; I knew he deviated from the general type of his race. He was unbelievably primitive, atavistic enough to plunge into uninhabited wilderness and live like a blood-mad gorilla in solitude that would have terrified and daunted a more normal member of his race.

So while the hunt flowed away in another direction, I rode toward Egypt, alone. But it was not altogether to look for Tope Braxton that I plunged into that isolated fastness. My mission was one of warning, rather than search. Deep in the mazy pine labyrinth, a white man and his servant lived alone, and it was the duty of any man to warn them that a red-handed killer might be skulking about their cabin.

I was foolish, perhaps, to be traveling on foot; but men who wear the name of

Garfield are not in the habit of turning back on a task once attempted. When my horse unexpectedly went lame, I left him at one of the negro cabins which fringe the edge of Egypt, and went on afoot. Night overtook me on the path, and I intended remaining until morning with the man I was going to warn—Richard Brent. He was a taciturn recluse, suspicious and peculiar, but he could scarcely refuse to put me up for the night. He was a mysterious figure; why he chose to hide himself in a southern pine forest none knew. He had been living in an old cabin in the heart of Egypt for about six months.

Suddenly, as I forged through the darkness, my speculations regarding the mysterious recluse were cut short, wiped clear out of my mind. I stopped dead, the nerves tingling in the skin on the backs of my hands. A sudden shriek in the dark has that effect, and this scream was edged with agony and terror. It came from somewhere ahead of me. Breathless silence followed that cry, a silence in which the forest seemed to hold its

"The thing that had been Adam Grimm rushed toward the girl, a skinning-knife in his hand."

breath and the darkness shut in more blackly still.

Again the scream was repeated, this time closer. Then I heard the pound of bare feet along the trail, and a form hurled itself at me out of the darkness.

MY REVOLVER was in my hand, and I instinctively thrust it out to fend the creature off. The only thing that kept me from pulling the trigger was the noise the object was making—gasping, sobbing noises of fear and pain. It was a man, and direly stricken. He blundered full into me, shrieked again, and fell sprawling, slobbering and yammering.

"Oh, my God, save me! Oh, God have mercy on me!"

"What the devil is it?" I demanded, my hair stirring on my scalp at the poignant agony in the gibbering voice.

The wretch recognized my voice; he clawed at my knees.

"Oh, Mas' Kirby, don' let him tetch me! He's done killed my body, and now he wants my soul! It's me—po' Jim Tike. Don' let him git me!"

I struck a match, and stood staring in amazement, while the match burned down to my fingers. A black man groveled in the dust before me, his eyes rolling up whitely. I knew him well—one of the negroes who lived in their tiny log cabins along the fringe of Egypt. He was spotted and splashed with blood, and I believed he was mortally wounded. Only abnormal energy rising from frenzied panic could have enabled him to run as far as he had. Blood jetted from torn veins and arteries in breast, shoulder and neck, and the wounds were ghastly to see, great ragged tears, that were never made by bullet or knife. One ear had been torn from his head, and hung loose, with a great piece of flesh from the angle of his jaw and neck, as if some gigantic beast had ripped it out with his fangs.

"What in God's name did this?" I ejaculated as the match went out, and he became merely an indistinct blob in the darkness below me. "A bear?" Even as I spoke I knew that no bear had been seen in Egypt for thirty years.

"*He* done it!" The thick, sobbing mumble welled up through the dark. "De white man dat come by my cabin and ask me to guide him to Mistuh Brent's house. He said he had a tooth-ache, so he had his head bandaged; but de bandages slipped and I seen his face—he killed me for seein' him."

"You mean he set dogs on you?" I demanded, for his wounds were such as I have seen on animals worried by vicious hounds.

"No, suh," whimpered the ebbing voice. "He done it hisself—aaaggghhh!"

The mumble broke in a shriek as he twisted his head, barely visible in the gloom, and stared back the way he had come. Death must have struck him in the midst of that scream, for it broke short at the highest note. He flopped convulsively once, like a dog hit by a truck, and then lay still.

I strained my eyes into the darkness, and made out a vague shape a few yards away in the trail. It was erect and tall as a man; it made no sound.

I opened my mouth to challenge the unknown visitant, but no sound came. An indescribable chill flowed over me, freezing my tongue to my palate. It was fear, primitive and unreasoning, and even while I stood paralyzed I could not understand it, could not guess why that silent, motionless figure, sinister as it was, should rouse such instinctive dread.

Then suddenly the figure moved quickly toward me, and I found my voice. "Who comes there?"

No answer; but the form came on in a

rush, and as I groped for a match, it was almost upon me. I struck the match—with a ferocious snarl the figure hurled itself against me, the match was struck from my hand and extinguished, and I felt a sharp pain on the side of my neck. My gun exploded almost involuntarily and without aim, and its flash dazzled me, obscuring rather than revealing the tall man-like figure that struck at me; then with a crashing rush through the trees my assailant was gone, and I staggered alone on the forest trail.

Swearing angrily, I felt for another match. Blood was trickling down my shoulder, soaking through my shirt. When I struck the match and investigated, another chill swept down my spine. My shirt was torn and the flesh beneath slightly cut; the wound was little more than a scratch, but the thing that roused nameless fear in my mind was the fact that *the wound was similar to those on poor Jim Tike.*

2. *"Dead Men with Torn Throats!"*

JIM TIKE was dead, lying face down in a pool of his own blood, his red-dabbled limbs sprawling drunkenly. I stared uneasily at the surrounding forest that hid the thing that had killed him. That it was a man I knew; the outline, in the brief light of the match, had been vague, but unmistakably human. But what sort of a weapon could make a wound like the merciless champing of great bestial teeth? I shook my head, recalling the ingenuity of mankind in the creation of implements of slaughter, and considered a more acute problem. Should I risk my life further by continuing upon my course, or should I return to the outer world and bring in men and dogs, to carry out poor Jim Tike's corpse, and hunt down his murderer?

I did not waste much time in indecision. I had set out to perform a task. If a murderous criminal besides Tope Braxton were abroad in the piny woods, there was all the more reason for warning the men in that lonely cabin. As for my own danger, I was already more than half-way to the cabin. It would scarcely be more dangerous to advance than to retreat. If I did turn back, and escape from Egypt alive, before I could rouse a posse, anything might happen in that isolated cabin under the black trees.

So I left Jim Tike's body there in the trail, and went on, gun in hand, and nerves sharpened by the new peril. That visitant had not been Tope Braxton. I had the dead man's word for it that the attacker was a mysterious white man; the glimpse I had had of the figure had confirmed the fact that he was not Tope Braxton. I would have known that squat, apish body even in the dark. This man was tall and spare, and the mere recollection of that gaunt figure made me shiver, unreasoningly.

It is no pleasant experience to walk along a black forest trail with only the stars glinting through the dense branches, and the knowledge that a ruthless murderer is lurking near, perhaps within arm's length in the concealing darkness. The recollection of the butchered black man burned vividly in my brain. Sweat beaded my face and hands, and I wheeled a score of times, glaring into the blackness where my ears had caught the rustle of leaves or the breaking of a twig—how could I know whether the sounds were but the natural noises of the forest, or the stealthy movements of the killer?

Once I stopped, with an eery crawling of my skin, as far away, through the black trees, I glimpsed a faint, lurid glow. It was not stationary; it moved, but it was too far away for me to make out the source. With my hair prickling unpleasantly I waited, for I knew not what; but

presently the mysterious glow vanished, and so keyed up I was to unnatural happenings, that it was only then that I realized the light might well have been made by a man walking with a pine-knot torch. I hurried on, cursing myself for my fears, the more baffling because they were so nebulous. Peril was no stranger to me in that land of feud and violence where century-old hates still smoldered down the generations. Threat of bullet or knife openly or from ambush had never shaken my nerves before; but I knew now that I was afraid—afraid of something I could not understand, or explain.

I sighed with relief when I saw Richard Brent's light gleaming through the pines, but I did not relax my vigilance. Many a man, danger-dogged, has been struck down at the very threshold of safety. Knocking on the door, I stood sidewise, peering into the shadows that ringed the tiny clearing and seemed to repel the faint light from the shuttered windows.

"Who's there?" came a deep harsh voice from within. "Is that you, Ashley?"

"No; it's me—Kirby Garfield. Open the door."

The upper half of the door swung inward, and Richard Brent's head and shoulders were framed in the opening. The light behind him left most of his face in shadow, but could not obscure the harsh gaunt lines of his features nor the gleam of the bleak gray eyes.

"What do you want, at this time of night?" he demanded, with his usual bruskness.

I replied shortly, for I did not like the man; courtesy in our part of the country is an obligation no gentleman thinks of shirking.

"I came to tell you that it's very likely that a dangerous negro is prowling in your vicinity. Tope Braxton killed Constable Joe Sorley and a negro trusty, and broke out of jail this morning. I think he took refuge in Egypt. I thought you ought to be warned."

"Well, you've warned me," he snapped, in his short-clipped Eastern accent. "Why don't you be off?"

"Because I have no intention of going back through those woods tonight," I answered angrily. "I came in here to warn you, not because of any love of you, but simply because you're a white man. The least you can do is to let me put up in your cabin until morning. All I ask is a pallet on the floor; you don't even have to feed me."

That last was an insult I could not withhold, in my resentment; at least in the piny woods it is considered an insult. But Richard Brent ignored my thrust at his penuriousness and discourtesy. He scowled at me. I could not see his hands.

"Did you see Ashley anywhere along the trail?" he asked finally.

Ashley was his servant, a saturnine figure as taciturn as his master, who drove into the distant river village once a month for supplies.

"No; he might have been in town, and left after I did."

"I guess I'll have to let you in," he muttered, grudgingly.

"Well, hurry up," I requested. "I've got a gash in my shoulder I want to wash and dress. Tope Braxton isn't the only killer abroad tonight."

At that he halted in his fumbling at the lower door, and his expression changed.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a dead nigger a mile or so up the trail. The man who killed him tried to kill me. He may be after you, for all I know. The nigger he killed was guiding him here."

RICHARD BRENT started violently, and his face went livid.

"Who—what do you mean?" His

voice cracked, unexpectedly falsetto. "What man?"

"I don't know. A fellow who manages to rip his victims like a hound——"

"A hound!" The words burst out in a scream. The change in Brent was hideous. His eyes seemed starting from his head; his hair stood up stiffly on his scalp, and his skin was the hue of ashes. His lips drew back from his teeth in a grin of sheer terror.

He gagged and then found voice.

"Get out!" he choked. "I see it, now! I know why you wanted to get into my house! You bloody devil! *He* sent you! You're his spy! *Go!*" The last was a scream and his hands rose above the lower half of the door at last. I stared into the gaping muzzles of a sawed-off shotgun. "Go, before I kill you!"

I stepped back off the stoop, my skin crawling at the thought of a close-range blast from that murderous implement of destruction. The black muzzles and the livid, convulsed face behind them promised sudden demolition.

"You cursed fool!" I growled, courting disaster in my anger. "Be careful with that thing. I'm going. I'd rather take a chance with a murderer than a madman."

Brent made no reply; panting and shivering like a man smitten with ague, he crouched over his shotgun and watched me as I turned and strode across the clearing. Where the trees began I could have wheeled and shot him down without much danger, for my .45 would outrange his shortened scatter-gun. But I had come there to warn the fool, not to kill him.

The upper door slammed as I strode in under the trees, and the stream of light was cut abruptly off. I drew my gun and plunged into the shadowy trail, my ears whetted again for sounds under the black branches.

My thoughts reverted to Richard Brent. It was surely no friend who had sought guidance to his cabin! The man's frantic fear had bordered on insanity. I wondered if it had been to escape this man that Brent had exiled himself in this lonely stretch of pinelands and river. Surely it had been to escape *something* that he had come; for he never concealed his hatred of the country nor his contempt for the native people, white and black. But I had never believed that he was a criminal, hiding from the law.

The light fell away behind me, vanished among the black trees. A curious, chill, sinking feeling obsessed me, as if the disappearance of that light, hostile as was its source, had severed the only link that connected this nightmarish adventure with the world of sanity and humanity. Grimly taking hold of my nerves, I strode on up the trail. But I had not gone far when again I halted.

This time it was the unmistakable sound of horses running; the rumble of wheels mingled with the pounding of hoofs. Who would be coming along that nighted trail in a rig but Ashley? But instantly I realized that the team was headed in the other direction. The sound receded rapidly, and soon became only a distant blur of noise.

I quickened my pace, much puzzled, and presently I heard hurried, stumbling footsteps ahead of me, and a quick, breathless panting that seemed indicative of panic. I distinguished the footsteps of two people, though I could see nothing in the intense darkness. At that point the branches interlaced over the trail, forming a black arch through which not even the stars gleamed.

"Ho, there!" I called cautiously. "Who are you?"

Instantly the sounds ceased abruptly, and I could picture two shadowy figures standing tensely still, with bated breath.

"Who's there?" I repeated. "Don't be afraid. It's me—Kirby Garfield."

"Stand where you are!" came a hard voice I recognized as Ashley's. "You sound like Garfield—but I want to be sure. If you move you'll get a slug through you."

There was a scratching sound and a tiny flame leaped up. A human hand was etched in its glow, and behind it the square, hard face of Ashley peering in my direction. A pistol in his other hand caught the glint of the fire; and on that arm rested another hand—a slim, white hand, with a jewel sparkling on one finger. Dimly I made out the slender figure of a woman; her face was like a pale blossom in the gloom.

"Yes, it's you, all right," Ashley grunted. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to warn Brent about Tope Braxton," I answered shortly; I do not relish being called on to account for my actions to anybody. "You've heard about it, naturally. If I'd known you were in town, it would have saved me a trip. What are you-all doing on foot?"

"Our horses ran away a short distance back," he answered. "There was a dead negro in the trail. But that's not what frightened the horses. When we got out to investigate, they snorted and wheeled and bolted with the rig. We had to come on on foot. It's been a pretty nasty experience. From the looks of the negro I judge a pack of wolves killed him, and the scent frightened the horses. We've been expecting an attack any minute."

"Wolves don't hunt in packs and drag down human beings in these woods. It was a man that killed Jim Tike."

In the waning glow of the match Ashley stood staring at me in amazement, and then I saw the astonishment ebb from his countenance and horror grow there. Slowly his color ebbed, leaving his bronzed face as ashy as that of his master had been. The match went out, and we stood silent.

"Well," I said impatiently, "speak up, man! Who's the lady with you?"

"She's Mr. Brent's niece." The answer came tonelessly through dry lips.

"I am Gloria Brent!" she exclaimed in a voice whose cultured accent was not lost in the fear that caused it to tremble. "Uncle Richard wired for me to come to him at once——"

"I've seen the wire," Ashley muttered. "You showed it to me. But I don't know how he sent it. He hasn't been to the village, to my knowledge, in months."

"I came on from New York as fast as I could!" she exclaimed. "I can't understand why the telegram was sent to me, instead of to somebody else in the family——"

"You were always your uncle's favorite, Miss," said Ashley.

"Well, when I got off the boat at the village just before nightfall, I found Ashley, just getting ready to drive home. He was surprized to see me, but of course he brought me on out; and then—that—that dead man——"

She seemed considerably shaken by the experience. It was obvious that she had been raised in a very refined and sheltered atmosphere. If she had been born in the piny woods, as I was, the sight of a dead man, white or black, would not have been an uncommon phenomenon to her.

"The—the dead man——" she stammered, and then she was answered most hideously.

From the black woods beside the trail rose a shriek of blood-curdling laughter. Slavering, mouthing sounds followed it, so strange and garbled that at first I did not recognize them as human words. Their unhuman intonations sent a chill down my spine.

"Dead men!" the inhuman voice chanted. "Dead men with torn throats! There will be dead men among the pines before dawn! Dead men! Fools, you are all dead!"

Ashley and I both fired in the direction of the voice, and in the crashing reverberations of our shots the ghastly chant was drowned. But the weird laugh rang out again, deeper in the woods, and then silence closed down like a black fog, in which I heard the semi-hysterical gasping of the girl. She had released Ashley and was clinging frantically to me. I could feel the quivering of her lithe body against mine. Probably she had merely followed her feminine instinct to seek refuge with the strongest; the light of the match had shown her that I was a bigger man than Ashley.

"Hurry, for God's sake!" Ashley's voice sounded strangled. "It can't be far to the cabin. Hurry! You'll come with us, Mr. Garfield?"

"What was it?" the girl was panting. "Oh, what *was* it?"

"A madman, I think," I answered, tucking her trembling little hand under my left arm. But at the back of my mind was whispering the grisly realization that no madman ever had a voice like that. It sounded—God!—it sounded like some bestial creature speaking with human words, but not with a human tongue!

"Get on the other side of Miss Brent, Ashley," I directed. "Keep as far from the trees as you can. If anything moves on that side, shoot first and ask questions later. I'll do the same on this side. Now come on!"

He made no reply as he complied; his fright seemed deeper than that of the girl; his breath came in shuddering gasps. The trail seemed endless, the darkness abysmal. Fear stalked along the trail on either hand, and slunk grinning at our backs. My flesh crawled with the thought of a demoniacal clawed and fanged *thing* hurling itself upon my shoulders.

The girl's little feet scarcely touched the ground, as we almost carried her between us. Ashley was almost as tall as I, though not so heavy, and was strongly made.

Ahead of us a light glimmered between the trees at last, and a gusty sigh of relief burst from his lips. He increased his pace until we were almost running.

"The cabin at last, thank God!" he gasped, as we plunged out of the trees.

"Hail your employer, Ashley," I grunted. "He's driven me off with a gun once tonight. I don't want to be shot by the old——" I stopped, remembering the girl.

"Mr. Brent!" shouted Ashley. "Mr. Brent! Open the door quick! It's me—Ashley!"

Instantly light flooded from the door as the upper half was drawn back, and Brent peered out, shotgun in hand, blinking into the darkness.

"Hurry and get in!" Panic still thrummed in his voice. Then: "Who's that standing beside you?" he shouted furiously.

"Mr. Garfield and your niece, Miss Gloria."

"Uncle Richard!" she cried, her voice catching in a sob. Pulling loose from us, she ran forward and threw her lithe body half over the lower door, throwing her arms around his neck. "Uncle Richard, I'm so afraid! What does this all mean?"

He seemed thunderstruck.

"Gloria!" he repeated. "What in heaven's name are you doing here?"

"Why, you sent for me!" She fumbled out a crumpled yellow telegraph form. "See? You said for me to come at once!"

He went livid again.

"I never sent that, Gloria! Good God, why should I drag you into my particular

hell? There's something devilish here. Come in—come in quickly!"

He jerked open the door and pulled her inside, never relinquishing the shotgun. He seemed to fumble in a daze. Ashley shouldered in after her, and exclaimed to me: "Come in, Mr. Garfield! Come in—come in!"

I had made no move to follow them. At the mention of my name, Brent, who seemed to have forgotten my presence, jerked loose from the girl with a choking cry and wheeled, throwing up the shotgun. But this time I was ready for him. My nerves were too much on edge to let me submit to any more bullying. Before he could bring the gun into position, he was looking in the muzzle of my .45.

"Put it down, Brent," I snapped. "Drop it, before I break your arm. I'm fed up on your idiotic suspicions."

He hesitated, glaring wildly, and behind him the girl shrank away. I suppose that in the full flood of the light from the doorway I was not a figure to inspire confidence in a young girl, with my frame which is built for strength and not looks, and my dark face, scarred by many a brutal river battle.

"He's our friend, Mr. Brent," interposed Ashley. "He helped us, in the woods."

"He's a devil!" raved Brent, clinging to his gun, though not trying to lift it. "He came here to murder us! He lied when he said he came to warn us against a black man. What man would be fool enough to come into Egypt at night, just to warn a stranger? My God, has he got you both fooled? I tell you, *he wears the brand of the hound!*"

"Then you know *he's* here!" cried Ashley.

"Yes; this fiend told me, trying to worm his way into the house. God, Ashley, *he's* tracked us down, in spite of all our cleverness. We have trapped ourselves! In a city, we might buy protection; but here, in this accursed forest, who will hear our cries or come to our aid when the fiend closes in upon us? What fools—what fools we were to think to hide from *him* in this wilderness!"

"I heard him laugh," shuddered Ashley. "He taunted us from the bushes in his beast's voice. I saw the man he killed—ripped and mangled as if by the fangs of Satan himself. What—what are we to do?"

"What can we do except lock ourselves in and fight to the last?" shrieked Brent. His nerves were in frightful shape.

"Please tell me what it is all about?" pleaded the trembling girl.

With a terrible despairing laugh Brent threw out his arm, gesturing toward the black woods beyond the faint light. "A devil in human form is lurking out there!" he exclaimed. "He has tracked me across the world, and has cornered me at last? Do you remember Adam Grimm?"

"The man who went with you to Mongolia five years ago? But he died, you said. You came back without him."

"I thought he was dead," muttered Brent. "Listen, I will tell you. Among the black mountains of Inner Mongolia, where no white man had ever penetrated, our expedition was attacked by fanatical devil-worshippers—the black monks of Erlik who dwell in the forgotten and accursed city of Yahlgan. Our guides and servants were killed, and all our stock driven off but one small camel.

"Grimm and I stood them off all day, firing from behind the rocks when they tried to rush us. That night we planned to make a break for it, on the camel that remained to us. But it was evident to me that the beast could not carry us both to safety. One man might have a chance. When darkness fell, I struck Grimm from behind with my gun butt, knocking

him senseless. Then I mounted the camel and fled——"

He did not heed the look of sick amazement and abhorrence growing in the girl's lovely face. Her wide eyes were fixed on her uncle as if she were seeing the real man for the first time, and was stricken by what she saw. He plunged on, too obsessed and engulfed by fear to care or heed what she thought of him. The sight of a soul stripped of its conventional veneer and surface pretense is not always pleasant.

"I broke through the lines of the besiegers and escaped in the night. Grimm, naturally, fell into the hands of the devil-worshippers, and for years I supposed that he was dead. They had the reputation of slaying, by torture, every alien that they captured. Years passed, and I had almost forgotten the episode. Then, seven months ago, I learned that he was alive—was, indeed, back in America, thirsting for my life. The monks had not killed him; through their damnable arts they had *altered* him. The man is no longer wholly human, but his whole soul is bent on my destruction. To appeal to the police would have been useless; he would have tricked them and wreaked his vengeance in spite of them. I fled from him up and down across the country for more than a month, like a hunted animal, and finally, when I thought I had thrown him off the track, I took refuge in this God-forsaken wilderness, among these barbarians, of whom that man Kirby Garfield is a typical example."

"*You* can talk of barbarians!" she flamed, and her scorn would have cut the soul of any man who was not so totally engrossed in his own fears.

She turned to me. "Mr. Garfield, please come in. You must not try to traverse this forest at night, with that fiend at large."

"No!" shrieked Brent. "Get back from that door, you little fool! Ashley, hold your tongue. I tell you, he is one of Adam Grimm's creatures! He shall not set foot in this cabin!"

She looked at me, pale, helpless and forlorn, and I pitied her as I despised Richard Brent; she looked so small and bewildered.

"I wouldn't sleep in your cabin if all the wolves of hell were howling outside," I snarled at Brent. "I'm going, and if you shoot me in the back, I'll kill you before I die. I wouldn't have come back at all, but the young lady needed my protection. She needs it now, but it's your privilege to deny her that. Miss Brent," I said, "if you wish, I'll come back tomorrow with a buckboard and carry you to the village. You'd better go back to New York."

"Ashley will take her to the village," roared Brent. "Damn you, *will* you go?"

With a sneer that brought the blood purpling his countenance, I turned squarely upon him and strode off. The door banged behind me, and I heard his falsetto voice mingled with the tearful accents of his niece. Poor girl, it must have been like a nightmare to her: to have been snatched out of her sheltered urban life and dropped down in a country strange and primitive to her, among people whose ways seemed incredibly savage and violent, and into a bloody episode of wrong and menace and vengeance. The deep pinelands of the Southwest seem strange and alien enough at any time to the average Eastern city-dweller; and added to their gloomy mystery and primordial wildness was this grim phantom out of an unsuspected past, like the figment of a nightmare.

I turned squarely about, stood motionless in the black trail, staring back at the pin-point of light which still winked through the trees. Peril hovered over the

cabin in that tiny clearing, and it was no part of a white man to leave that girl with the protection of none but her half-lunatic uncle and his servant. Ashley looked like a fighter. But Brent was an unpredictable quantity. I believed he was tinged with madness. His insane rages and equally insane suspicions seemed to indicate as much. I had no sympathy for him. A man who would sacrifice his friend to save his own life deserves death.

But evidently Grimm was mad. His slaughter of Jim Tike suggested homicidal insanity. Poor Jim Tike had never wronged him. I would have killed Grimm for that murder, alone, if I had had the opportunity. And I did not intend that the girl should suffer for the sins of her uncle. If Brent had not sent that telegram, as he swore, then it looked much as if she had been summoned for a sinister purpose. Who but Grimm himself would have summoned her, to share the doom he planned for Richard Brent?

Turning, I strode back down the trail. If I could not enter the cabin, I could at least lurk in the shadows ready at hand if my help was needed. A few moments later I was under the fringe of trees that ringed the clearing.

Light still shone through the cracks in the shutters, and at one place a portion of the window-pane was visible. And even as I looked, this pane was shattered, as if something had been hurled through it. Instantly the night was split by a sheet of flame that burst in a blinding flash out of the doors and windows and chimney of the cabin. For one infinitesimal instant I saw the cabin limned blackly against the tongues of flame that flashed from it. With the flash came the thought that the cabin had been blown up—but no sound accompanied the explosion.

Even while the blaze was still in my eyes, another explosion filled the universe with blinding sparks, and this one was accompanied by a thunderous reverberation. Consciousness was blotted out too suddenly for me to know that I had been struck on the head from behind, terrifically and without warning.

3. *Black Hands*

A FLICKERING light was the first thing that impressed itself upon my awakening faculties. I blinked, shook my head, came suddenly fully awake. I was lying on my back in a small glade, walled by towering black trees which fitfully reflected the uncertain light that emanated from a torch stuck upright in the earth near me. My head throbbed, and blood clotted my scalp; my hands were fastened together before me by a pair of handcuffs. My clothes were torn and my skin scratched as if I had been dragged brutally through the brush.

A huge black shape squatted over me—a black man of medium height but of gigantic breadth and thickness, clad only in ragged, muddy breeches—Tope Braxton. He held a gun in each hand, and alternately aimed first one and then the other at me, squinting along the barrel. One pistol was mine; the other had once belonged to the constable that Braxton had brained.

I lay silent for a moment, studying the play of the torchlight on the great black torso. His huge body gleamed shiny ebony or dull bronze as the light flickered. He was like a shape from the abyss whence mankind crawled ages ago. His primitive ferocity was reflected in the bulging knots of muscles that corded his long, massive apish arms, his huge sloping shoulders; above all the bullet-shaped head that jutted forward on a column-like neck. The wide, flat nostrils, murky eyes, thick lips that writhed back from

tusk-like teeth—all proclaimed the man's kinship with the primordial.

"Where the devil do you fit into this nightmare?" I demanded.

He showed his teeth in an ape-like grin.

"I thought it was time you was comin' to, Kirby Garfield," he grinned. "I wanted you to come to 'fo' I kill you, so you know *who* kill you. Den I go back and watch Mistuh Grimm kill de ol' man and de gal."

"What do you mean, you black devil?" I demanded harshly. "Grimm? What do you know about Grimm?"

"I meet him in de deep woods, after he kill Jim Tike. I heah a gun fire and come with a torch to see who—thought maybe somebody after me. I meet Mistuh Grimm."

"So you were the man I saw with the torch," I grunted.

"Mistuh Grimm smaht man. He say if I help him kill some folks, he help me git away. He take and throw bomb into de cabin; dat bomb don't kill dem folks, just paralyze 'em. I watchin' de trail, and hit you when you come back. Dat man Ashley ain't plumb paralyze, so Mistuh Grimm, he take and bite out he throat like he done Jim Tike."

"What do you mean, bite out his throat?" I demanded.

"Mistuh Grimm ain't a human bein'. He stan' up and walk like a man, but he part hound, or wolf."

"You mean a werewolf?" I asked, my scalp prickling.

He grinned. "Yeah, dat's it. Dey had 'em in de old country." Then he changed his mood. "I done talk long enough. Gwine blow yo' brains out now!"

His thick lips froze in a killer's mirthless grin as he squinted along the barrel of the pistol in his right hand. My whole body went tense, as I sought desperately for a loophole to save my life. My legs were not tied, but my hands were manacled, and a single movement would bring hot lead crashing through my brain. In my desperation I plumbed the depths of black folklore for a dim, all but forgotten superstition.

"These handcuffs belonged to Joe Sorley, didn't they?" I demanded.

"Uh huh," he grinned, without ceasing to squint along the sights. "I took 'em 'long with his gun after I beat his head in with window-bar. I thought I might need 'em."

"Well," I said, "if you kill me while I'm wearing them, you're eternally damned! Don't you know that if you kill a man who's wearing a cross, his ghost will haunt you for ever after?"

He jerked the gun down suddenly, and his grin was replaced by a snarl.

"What you mean, white man?"

"Just what I say. There's a cross scratched on the inside of one of these cuffs. I've seen it a thousand times. Now go ahead and shoot, and I'll haunt you into hell."

"Which cuff?" he snarled, lifting a gun-butt threateningly.

"Find out for yourself," I sneered. "Go ahead; why don't you shoot? I hope you've had plenty of sleep lately, because I'll see to it that you never sleep again. In the night, under the trees, you'll see my face leering at you. You'll hear my voice in the wind that moans through the cypress branches. When you close your eyes in the dark, you'll feel my fingers at your throat."

"Shut up!" he roared, brandishing his pistols. His black skin was tinged with an ashy hue.

"Shut me up—if you dare!" I struggled up to a sitting position, and then fell back cursing. Damn you, my leg's broken!"

At that the ashy tinge faded from his

ebon skin, and purpose rose in his reddish eyes.

"So yo' leg's busted!" He bared his glistening teeth in a beastly grin. "Thought you fell mighty hard, and then I dragged you a right smart piece."

Laying both pistols on the ground, well out of my reach, he rose and leaned over me, dragging a key out of his breeches pocket. His confidence was justified; for was I not unarmed, helpless with a broken leg? I did not need the manacles. Bending over me he turned the key in the old-fashioned handcuffs and tore them off. And like twin striking snakes my hands shot to his black throat, locked fiercely and dragged him down on top of me.

I HAD always wondered what would be the outcome of a battle between me and Tope Braxton. One can hardly go about picking fights with black men. But now a fierce joy surged in me, a grim gratification that the question of our relative prowess was to be settled once and for all, with life for the winner and death for the loser.

Even as I gripped him, Braxton realized that I had tricked him into freeing me—that I was no more crippled than he was. Instantly he exploded into a hurricane of ferocity that would have dismembered a lesser man than I. We rolled on the pine-needles, rending and tearing.

Were I penning an elegant romance, I should tell how I vanquished Tope Braxton by a combination of higher intelligence, boxing skill and deft science that defeated his brute strength. But I must stick to facts in this chronicle.

Intelligence played little part in that battle. It would have helped me no more than it would help a man in the actual grip of a gorilla. As for artificial skill, Tope would have torn the average boxer or wrestler limb from limb. Man-developed science alone could not have withstood the blinding speed, tigerish ferocity and bone-crushing strength that lurked in Tope Braxton's terrible thews.

It was like fighting a wild beast, and I met him at his own game. I fought Tope Braxton as the rivermen fight, as savages fight, as bull apes fight. Breast to breast, muscle straining against muscle, iron fist crushing against hard skull, knee driven to groin, teeth slashing sinewy flesh, gouging, tearing, smashing. We both forgot the pistols on the ground; we must have rolled over them half a dozen times. Each of us was aware of only one desire, one blind crimson urge to kill with naked hands, to rend and tear and maul and trample until the other was a motionless mass of bloody flesh and splintered bone.

I do not know how long we fought; time faded into a blood-shot eternity. His fingers were like iron talons that tore the flesh and bruised the bone beneath. My head was swimming from its impacts against the hard ground, and from the pain in my side I knew at least one rib was broken. My whole body was a solid ache and burn of twisted joints and wrenched thews. My garments hung in ribbons, wrenched by the blood that sluiced from an ear that had been ripped loose from my head. But if I was taking terrible punishment, I was dealing it too.

The torch had been knocked down and kicked aside, but it still smoldered fitfully, lending a lurid dim light to that primordial scene. Its light was not so red as the murder-lust that clouded my dimming eyes.

In a red haze I saw his white teeth gleaming in a grin of agonized effort, his eyes rolling whitely from a mask of blood. I had mauled his face out of all human resemblance; from eyes to waist his black hide was laced with crimson.

Sweat slimed us, and our fingers slipped as they gripped. Writhing half-free from his rending clutch, I drove every straining knot of muscle in my body behind my fist that smashed like a mallet against his jaw. There was a crack of bone, an involuntary groan; blood spurted and the broken jaw dropped down. A bloody froth covered the loose lips. Then for the first time those black, tearing fingers faltered; I felt the great body that strained against mine yield and sag. And with a wild-beast sob of gratified ferocity ebbing from my pulped lips, my fingers at last met in his throat.

Down on his back he went, with me on his breast. His failing hands clawed at my wrists, weakly and more weakly. And I strangled him, slowly, with no trick of jiu-jitsu or wrestling, but with sheer brute strength, bending his head back and back between its shoulders until the thick neck snapped like a rotten branch.

In that drunkenness of battle, I did not know when he died, did not know that it was death that had at last melted the iron thews of the body beneath me. Reeling up numbly, I dazedly stamped on his breast and head until the bones gave way under my heels, before I realized that Tope Braxton was dead.

Then I would have fallen and lapsed into insensibility, but for the dizzy realization that my work was not yet ended. Groping with numb hands I found the pistols, and reeled away through the pines, in the direction in which my forest-bred instinct told me the cabin of Richard Brent stood. With each step my tough recuperative powers asserted themselves.

Tope had not dragged me far. Following his jungle instincts, he had merely hauled me off the trail into the deeper woods. A few steps brought me to the trail, and I saw again the light of the cabin gleaming through the pines. Braxton had not been lying then, about the nature of that bomb. At least the soundless explosion had not destroyed the cabin, for it stood as I had seen it last, apparently undamaged. Light poured, as before, from the shuttered windows, but from it came a high-pitched inhuman laughter that froze the blood in my veins. It was the same laughter that had mocked us beside the shadowed trail.

4. The Hound of Satan

CROUCHING in the shadows, I circled the little clearing to reach a side of the cabin which was without a window. In the thick darkness, with no gleam of light to reveal me, I glided out from the trees and approached the building. Near the wall I stumbled over something bulky and yielding, and almost went to my knees, my heart shooting into my throat with the fear of the noise betraying me. But the ghastly laughter still belled horribly from inside the cabin, mingled with the whimpering of a human voice.

It was Ashley I had stumbled over, or rather his body. He lay on his back, staring sightlessly upward, his head lolling back on the red ruin of his neck. His throat had been torn out; from chin to collar it was a great, gaping, ragged wound. His garments were slimy with blood.

Slightly sickened, in spite of my experience with violent deaths, I glided to the cabin wall and sought without success for a crevice between the logs. The laughter had ceased in the cabin and that frightful, unhuman voice was ringing out, making the nerves quiver in the backs of my hands. With the same difficulty that I had experienced before, I made out the words.

"——And so they did not kill me, the black monks of Erlik. They preferred a

jest—a delicious jest, from their point of view. Merely to kill me would be too kind; they thought it more humorous to play with me awhile, as cats do with a mouse, and then send me back into the world with a mark I could never erase—the brand of the hound. That's what they call it. And they did their job well, indeed. None knows better than they how to *alter* a man. Black magic? Bah! Those devils are the greatest scientists in the world. What little the Western world knows about science has leaked out in little trickles from those black mountains.

Those devils could conquer the world, if they wanted to. They know things that no modern even dares to guess. They know more about plastic surgery, for instance, than all the scientists of the world put together. They understand glands, as no European or American understands them; they know how to retard or exercise them, so as to produce certain results—God, what results! Look at me! Look, damn you, and go mad!"

I glided about the cabin until I reached a window, and peered through a crack in the shutter.

Richard Brent lay on a divan in a room incongruously richly furnished for that primitive setting. He was bound hand and foot; his face was livid and scarcely human. In his starting eyes was the look of a man who has at last come face to face with ultimate horror. Across the room from him the girl, Gloria, was spread-eagled on a table, held helpless with cords on her wrists and ankles. She was stark naked, her clothing lying in scattered confusion on the floor as if they had been brutally ripped from her. Her head was twisted about as she stared in wide-eyed horror at the tall figure which dominated the scene.

He stood with his back toward the window where I crouched, as he faced Richard Brent. To all appearances this figure was human—the figure of a tall, spare man in dark, close-fitting garments, with a sort of cape hanging from his lean, wide shoulders. But at the sight a strange trembling took hold of me, and I recognized at last the dread I had felt since I first glimpsed that gaunt form on the shadowy trail above the body of poor Jim Tike. There was something unnatural about the figure, something not apparent as he stood there with his back to me, yet an unmistakable suggestion of *abnormality;* and my feelings were the dread and loathing that normal men naturally feel toward the abnormal.

"They made me the horror I am today, and then drove me forth," he was yammering in his horrible mouthing voice. "But the *change* was not made in a day, or a month, or a year! They played with me, as devils play with a screaming soul on the white-hot grids of hell! Time and again I would have died, in spite of them, but I was upheld by the thought of vengeance! Through the long black years, shot red with torture and agony, I dreamed of the day when I would pay the debt I owed to you, Richard Brent, you spawn of Satan's vilest gutter!

"So at last the hunt began. When I reached New York I sent you a photograph of my—my face, and a letter detailing what had happened—and what *would* happen. You fool, did you think you could escape me? Do you think I would have warned you, if I were not sure of my prey? I wanted you to suffer with the knowledge of your doom; to live in terror, to flee and hide like a hunted wolf. You fled and I hunted you, from coast to coast. You did temporarily give me the slip when you came here, but it was inevitable that I should smell you out. When the black monks of Yahlgan gave me *this*" (his hand seemed to stab at his face, and Richard Brent cried out

slobberingly), "they also instilled in my nature something of the spirit of the beast they copied.

"To kill you was not enough. I wished to glut my vengeance to the last shuddering ounce. That is why I sent a telegram to your niece, the one person in the world that you cared for. My plans worked out perfectly—with one exception. The bandages I have worn ever since I left Yahlgan were displaced by a branch and I had to kill the fool who was guiding me to your cabin. No man looks upon my face and lives, except Tope Braxton who is more like an ape than a man, anyway. I fell in with him shortly after I was fired at by the man Garfield, and I took him into my confidence, recognizing a valuable ally. He is too brutish to feel the same horror at my appearance that the other negro felt. He thinks I am a demon of some sort, but so long as I am not hostile toward him, he sees no reason why he should not ally himself with me.

"It was fortunate I took him in, for it was he who struck down Garfield as he was returning. I would have already killed Garfield myself, but he was too strong, too handy with his gun. You might have learned a lesson from these people, Richard Brent. They live hardily and violently, and they are tough and dangerous as timber wolves. But you—you are soft and over-civilized. You will die far too easily. I wish you were as hard as Garfield was. I would like to keep you alive for days, to suffer.

"I gave Garfield a chance to get away, but the fool came back and had to be dealt with. That bomb I threw through the window would have had little effect upon him. It contained one of the chemical secrets I managed to learn in Mongolia, but it is effective only in relation to the bodily strength of the victim. It was enough to knock out a girl and a soft, pampered degenerate like you. But Ashley was able to stagger out of the cabin and would quickly have regained his full powers, if I had not come upon him and put him beyond power of harm."

BRENT lifted a moaning cry. There was no intelligence in his eyes, only a ghastly fear. Foam flew from his lips. He was mad—mad as the fearful being that posed and yammered in that room of horror. Only the girl, writhing pitifully on that ebony table, was sane. All else was madness and nightmare. And suddenly complete delirium overcame Adam Grimm, and the laboring monotones shattered in a heart-stopping scream.

"First the girl!" shrieked Adam Grimm—or the thing that had been Adam Grimm. "The girl—to be slain as I have seen women slain in Mongolia—to be skinned alive, slowly—oh, so slowly! She shall bleed to make you suffer, Richard Brent—suffer as I suffered in black Yahlgan! She shall not die until there is no longer an inch of skin left on her body below her neck! Watch me flay your beloved niece, Richard Brent!"

I do not believe Richard Brent comprehended. He was beyond understanding anything. He yammered gibberish, tossing his head from side to side, spattering foam from his livid, working lips. I was lifting a revolver, but just then Adam Grimm whirled, and the sight of his face froze me into paralysis. What unguessed masters of nameless science dwell in the black towers of Yahlgan I dare not dream, but surely black sorcery from the pits of hell went into the remolding of that countenance.

Ears, forehead and eyes were those of an ordinary man; but the nose, mouth and jaws were such as men have not even imagined in nightmares. I find myself unable to find adequate descriptive phrases. They were hideously elongated, like the muzzle of an animal. There was no chin;

upper and lower jaws jutted like the jaws of a hound or a wolf, and the teeth, bared by the snarling bestial lips, were gleaming fangs. How those jaws managed to frame human words I cannot guess.

But the change was deeper than superficial appearance. In his eyes, which blazed like coals of hell's fire, was a glare that never shone from any human's eyes, sane or mad. When the black devil-monks of Yahlgan altered Adam Grimm's face, they wrought a corresponding change in his soul. He was no longer a human being; he was a veritable werewolf, as terrible as any in medieval legend.

The thing that had been Adam Grimm rushed toward the girl, a curved skinning-knife gleaming in his hand, and I shook myself out of my daze of horror, and fired through the hole in the shutter. My aim was unerring; I saw the cape jerk to the impact of the slug, and at the crash of the shot the monster staggered and the knife fell from his hand. Then, instantly, he whirled and dashed back across the room toward Richard Brent. With lightning comprehension he realized what had happened, knew he could take only one victim with him, and made his choice instantly.

I do not believe that I can logically be blamed for what happened. I might have smashed that shutter, leaped into the room and grappled with the thing that the monks of Inner Mongolia had made of Adam Grimm. But so swiftly did the monster move that Richard Brent would have died anyway before I could have burst into the room. I did what seemed the only obvious thing—I poured lead through the window into that loping horror as it crossed the room.

That should have halted it, should have crashed it down dead on the floor. But Adam Grimm plunged on, heedless of the slugs ripping into him. His vitality was more than human, more than bestial; there was something demoniac about him, invoked by the black arts that made him what he was. No natural creature could have crossed that room under that raking hail of close-range lead. At that distance I could not miss. He reeled at each impact, but he did not fall until I had smashed home the sixth bullet. Then he crawled on, beast-like, on hands and knees, froth and blood dripping from his grinning jaws. Panic swept me. Frantically I snatched the second gun and emptied it into that body that writhed painfully onward, spattering blood at every movement. But all hell could not keep Adam Grimm from his prey, and death itself shrank from the ghastly determination in that once-human soul.

With twelve bullets in him, literally shot to pieces, his brains oozing from a great hole in his temple, Adam Grimm reached the man on the divan. The misshapen head dipped; a scream gurgled in Richard Brent's throat as the hideous jaws locked. For a mad instant those two frightful visages seemed to melt together, to my horrified sight—the mad human and the mad inhuman. Then with a wild-beast gesture, Grimm threw up his head, ripping out his enemy's jugular, and blood deluged both figures. Grimm lifted his head, with his dripping fangs and bloody muzzle, and his lips writhed back in a last peal of ghastly laughter that choked in a rush of blood, as he crumpled and lay still.

"It reared erect, as a fountain might gush up. It put forth arms, developed breasts."

The Crawling Horror

By THORP McCLUSKY

A grim tale of the weird terror that wrought death and panic at Brubaker Farm

I AM about to set down on paper a sequence of indisputable happenings. At some of the incidents I was personally present, and the story of the others has come to me through the testimony of unimpeachable and trustworthy witnesses.

I am a country physician, having practised in this single village all my life, as, indeed, my father did before me. The

people here are farmers, mostly of Dutch or German descent, with a few Poles and Lithuanians.

About two miles beyond the village Hans Ludwig Brubaker had his farm. The farm is still there, and it is worked by relatives, but Hans has gone. No one definitely knows where, or *what,* he is. We can only guess.

Hans lived there alone. His mother, who outlived Brubaker, senior, died in 1929 or 1930, and Hans was left by himself. The village naturally assumed that he would presently marry. But, for some obscure reason, he did not, although he showed a decided preference for one young woman.

Now there is no way of definitely knowing just when the strange progression of events, at first of seeming unimportance, began. But, with the whole story complete, although I cannot say *when* it began, I can tell *how* it began. I know that, during the first months, Hans did not suspect anything out of the ordinary. Obviously he misunderstood, and so ignored, the small beginnings which led slowly, step by step, toward horror. He told me, possibly three months ago, how it had begun.

"I thought the rats were fighting, at first," he explained, with the uneasy, deprecatory laugh of the person who does not expect to be believed. "There was a powerful lot of rats about the place; the cats kept them down somewhat, but there always seemed to be more growing up, scratching and squeaking in the walls.

"But the idea of their *fighting;* I remember thinking that there must be one awful big fellow in there somewhere. I could hear him scuffle, and then—*plop!*—down he'd come off a crossbeam between the walls, soft and heavy-like.

"And the cats heard him, too. I watched them for a few weeks, snooping around, excited-like, heard that big fellow go *plop* every once in a while, listened to the squeaking and running in the walls that seemed, somehow, scared. The idea got into my head that the big one was a killer. He was, too, there's not a doubt of it. Whenever he was in one place the rest were elsewhere; the mice began to desert the house for the barn. My cats got quite a number of them that way.

"Along about then a strange thing happened. One day I noticed a strange cat hanging around; white, she was, and pretty. She stayed around the porch while I was feeding my own cats, and I tried to pet her and feed her, but she wouldn't come near me and she wouldn't eat—seemed interested only in Peter, a big tiger-cat of mine.

"Well, that was natural, even if it did seem funny that she wouldn't eat. Peter watched her some, and that night he stayed out.

"He never came back. And I never heard the big rat, from that night on, in the walls again.

"You know how cats are around a farm—they earn their keep, and they're good company. I always had seven or eight, sometimes as many as a dozen of them. And my cats began to disappear, one by one. In two weeks there were only a couple left.

"I couldn't understand it; I remember that I began to think somebody was poisoning them. The two that were left looked sick and scared, too, as if they knew something was wrong, and then, one day, they went away, and never came back.

"Even then I didn't have any suspicions that came near the truth, and for quite a while after that I didn't notice anything.

"But it began again. This night was colder, I remember. It must have been around the first of November. I had a chunk fire going. It was evening, and I

was sitting with my feet in the oven. My shoes were on the floor on the left side of the chair, a big Morris chair that's in the kitchen—the fire was nice and warm, the doors were all shut, and I was smoking my pipe.

"THE house was still as death; one of my two collie dogs was outside somewhere, and the other one, Nan, was lying close to the stove at my right, a foot or so from my chair, soaking in the warmth, sleeping. It must have been about half past nine; it certainly wasn't later than that.

"I enjoy that last hour or so before I get into bed; everything is done for the day and I can lie back and rest and think. I had everything arranged for solid comfort, the chair-back was set just right, and my pipe was going good.

"Looking back, now, and trying to remember, I must have dozed off for a few minutes. I forget whether I put my pipe out or not—maybe it just hung loose in my left hand and went out of itself; anyway, I found it on the floor beside the stove, afterward. Yes, I was probably just sleeping, with the pipe dangling in my hand.

"My right arm was hanging from the chair arm, limp-like, and as I began to come out of that little snooze I reached down to stroke the dog. But as I came wide awake I realized that there was something queer about that thing under my hand, beside my chair.

"It didn't *feel* like a dog's back. It was the right distance from the floor, but it was slippery, and there wasn't any hair on it. My hand kept moving, but right off I knew that, whatever I was petting, it wasn't any dog. I had the idea that if I pressed my hand down I could push my fingers right into it.

"All this took a lot less time than in the telling—maybe three or four seconds. I began to be scared. I turned to look, and God knows what I expected to see—certainly nothing like what was there.

"It was a slimy sort of stuff, transparent-looking, without any shape to it. It looked as though if you picked it up it would drip right through your fingers. And it was alive—I don't know how I knew that, but I was sure of it even before I looked. It was alive, and a sort of shapeless arm of it lay across the dog's back and covered her head. She didn't move.

"I guess I yelled then, Doctor Kurt, and I jumped out of the chair and reached for the poker. That slimy thing hadn't moved, but I knew that if it wanted to it could move like lightning. It was heavy-looking, too; I remember thinking that it must have weighed about fifty pounds.

"I hit at the thing with a poker, and quick as thought the whole mess started sliding across the floor, stretching out as worms do, oozing under the crack beneath the door that leads onto the porch. Before I knew it the thing was gone.

"I looked at Nan. She hadn't moved, and she seemed asleep. I shook her until she opened her eyes. And her eyes looked *dead*. . . .

"Well, Doctor Kurt, you'll believe me when I tell you that I didn't sleep that night. I caught myself listening for noises, not that I knew what to listen for, except the sound of that thing sliding back into the house again; for I remembered that it could go through a crack! If I looked once around that kitchen, everywhere, I looked a hundred times.

"Peg didn't come back all night. That was strange, because she usually stayed right around close. It was just as though she was afraid.

"As it was just getting light Peg came up on the porch. I was glad to hear her, and I let her in quick. Then she saw Nan.

"She made a funny sort of howling noise, and her ears dropped flat against her head. Then she went for Nan. Froth was beginning to run from her mouth—it was just as though, although she was trying to kill Nan, she was deathly afraid. It wasn't pretty to see.

"Nan didn't fight back. She just lay there, as though she didn't see what it was, as though she didn't know enough to try to fight, or run. If I hadn't dragged Peg off, Nan would have been dead in another minute. And even after I had put Peg outdoors Nan didn't move much; she just shuddered a little, and she didn't even lick at the places where the blood was running down.

"I had to shoot her, then. It made me sick to do it. Then I dragged her out off the back porch and went to the barn to do the milking. I didn't eat any breakfast. I felt sick to the stomach.

"After I had finished the chores around the barn I got a shovel and went back to the house.

"*Nan's body was gone.* There wasn't a sign of her—not a bone or a patch of hair—nothing but a clean scuffed place in the grass. At first I thought I might have made a mistake; maybe I had left her around the other side of the house. But I went around to the front porch, and Nan was nowhere.

"The funny thing, Doctor Kurt, is that somehow I knew that it would happen just like it did.

"I didn't say anything to anybody, then. I just watched, and waited. And a few weeks later I saw the dog that looked like Nan, Doctor Kurt. It was Nan, yet it wasn't. I saw her hanging around the barnyard, and I whistled to her, absent-minded, and then I remembered that Nan was dead. But it looked like Nan, and I knew that it was waiting for Peg to come out.

"I knew that it wasn't Nan, Doctor Kurt, because it didn't come when I whistled.

"Two or three times that week I saw that dog that looked like Nan and that wasn't Nan hanging around, and each time she looked thinner and weaker. And then, after a few days, I didn't see her any more. She had just gone away.

"For two weeks nothing happened. Then, one day, I spotted a strange dog, a big dog, hanging around. And that night Peg vanished. She never came back.

"You can see how it was, Doctor Kurt? I began to see a sort of pattern to it. First the mice, then the cats, then the dogs. I got to wondering if it would get the cattle next, or maybe the people."

Abruptly, Hans paused. I think that, then, I carried it off perfectly. I did not utter a word, but merely waited impassively. Whatever I did, or omitted to do, it gave Hans confidence, for after a moment he went on.

"Doctor Kurt, as sure as I'm sitting here, it's gone from animals to humans!"

"Humans?" I asked.

Hans nodded. "It's happened," he said softly. "One afternoon, three weeks ago, I was standing in the yard—you know that along about then we were having stiff frosts every morning and night? I saw this strange boy coming down the road.

"He wasn't more than twelve or thirteen years old, and he was wearing odds and ends of clothes that looked as though he had picked them up anywhere. I looked at him, and right away I knew that he was a runaway.

"The kid as he walked along kept looking at the house as if he had half a mind to stop. But he didn't stop, just went on past, slowly, looking back from time to time. I went down the driveway, and I almost called out to him, but I didn't.

It was as if something inside me said, 'Don't call—that thing you see there isn't a boy, it's Death in the shape of a boy.' That's what I seemed to think, Doctor Kurt; I was scared, and ashamed, too. I was so ashamed that I went right down to the road with the idea of yelling at the boy. Then I happened to look down at my feet.

"You know I told you that there had been a frost, Doctor Kurt? It was cold enough all night to form good solid ice. And there had been a thaw for a couple of days beforehand. Well, that slushy stuff in the road had frozen, not hard enough to hold a horse or a cow, but plenty hard enough to hold a fairly heavy man, because when I walked on it it didn't crack or break except once in every five or six steps. But where that kid had walked, the ice was broken at every step—and he looked to weigh not more than half what I do!

"I looked at those tracks in the frozen slush, Doctor Kurt, and then I turned around and walked to the house. I knew then that the thing had come back. Maybe my house is home to it; maybe, because it began in my house, it likes to come back.

"I wanted to tell, then. But I didn't dare; I was afraid people would laugh. But I'm going to tell now, because two days ago the Peterson kid disappeared, and he hasn't come back. And what's more, he'll never come back! He's part of that thing that began in my walls, with the rats."

Hans stopped speaking. I knew that there was nothing more for him to tell. The room was oddly silent. Presently he asked, "What can be done about it?"

I didn't know what to say. But I felt that I should say something, should try, at least, to quiet the man's nerves.

"Go home," I advised at last, gently. "Get a good night's sleep, and come back tomorrow. I'll have thought it over by then."

2

THAT night I sat up late, pondering the story Hans had told me. Perhaps, at that time, I almost believed him. And in the morning, as I had expected, he returned.

It all looked much more impossible in the bright light of mid-morning than it had looked the evening before. I grasped at the idea that, although something extremely strange might be going on, yet the explanation might come, presently, of itself, in a purely matter-of-fact manner. In effect, that is what I told Brubaker.

Hans went away disappointed, almost angry. And not more than twenty minutes after he left my office, Hilda Lang came in. She seemed extraordinarily perturbed.

"Doctor Kurt," she began abruptly, "do you think that Hans is crazy?"

"Why do you ask?" I returned. Talking with her was different from talking with Hans. She was a beautiful young woman, tall, long-waisted, slender-limbed, with fair blue eyes and yellow hair and a gloriously clear skin. There was something imperiously demanding about her that disturbed me.

She looked at me. Then she made a curious, impatient gesture. "Oh, don't pretend. You know that Hans came to you yesterday with a story. He has told me the same things that he told you. Doctor Kurt—you know about—all this. Do you think he is crazy?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry on that account, Hilda. Hans is not crazy. He may be fooled, he may even be fooling himself; but he is sane."

Hilda sighed in relief. "Thank God for that. I was worried." Then, as a sudden, new thought struck her, she

leaned forward tensely. "But if he is sane his story is true!"

She paused. I said nothing.

"I'm going to marry him," she said abruptly. "He's been afraid of this thing long enough. If there's nothing to it, it shouldn't keep us apart. And if he's in danger, two people in that lonely house are better than one."

I waited a long time, while the room hung silent, before I replied. "You believe in this danger, then?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe in it. As I believe in Hans, I believe in it."

And, in a little while, she went away.

For the rest of the week I went about my usual routine. Hans, of course, did not come back. But I learned that he suddenly married Hilda, and that they were living at the Brubaker farm. A day or two later I drove out to see them.

Hans was working about the back of the house as I drove into the yard. He straightened slowly, put down the tools from his hands, and walked over to the car. He looked tired, as though he had not been sleeping well.

Shutting off the motor, I climbed from the car. Then, while I was close to him, Hans whispered hoarsely, "There is danger here, Doctor Kurt—I can feel it. I watch every night, Doctor. I have seen things that I haven't told *her* about. I can't tell her. I want to sell the place and go away, where it's safe. But Hilda laughs—she hasn't seen the things I've seen."

"Just what have you seen?" I asked.

He looked at me eagerly. "Come to the house, tonight, after Hilda has gone to bed," he whispered.

I nodded. Then we were at the kitchen door and there was Hilda, smiling, beautiful in her tall, strong fairness, welcoming me to her home. . . .

That night, at eleven o'clock, I returned down the rutted road that led to the Brubaker farm. It was abysmally dark, but it was not cold. I remember thinking that it might snow before morning. Long before I reached the Brubakers' I could see two tiny yellow lights at the back of the house, the kitchen and the back bedroom. I drove past the house a hundred yards, parked the car alongside the road, and returned to the house on foot.

I did not look at my watch; so I do not know how long I stood outside in the driveway. Waiting like that seems interminable, I know. And, obviously, I could not come in until Hilda was asleep.

At last both lights were put out, almost simultaneously, and in a few minutes, as I had expected, the light in the kitchen flared up again. I walked softly to the rear door and knocked.

Hans let me in immediately. I stepped into the kitchen, my eyes slightly dazzled by the brilliance within, and it was not until I had been comfortably seated beside the table that I noticed, with a start, what Hans was doing.

He was sealing the bedroom door off from the kitchen with wax, making the passageway between the two rooms hermetically tight! He worked with the rapidity of one who does a task he has performed before. Presently he had sealed the doorway in its entirety. Then he put the remaining mass of wax in a piece of brown paper and carefully hid it away behind the woodbox in the corner. He came across the room and sat down close beside me. We talked in whispers.

"I'm learning, all the time, what the thing can do," he told me. "It came back three days ago. But I'm tired, tired to death. I haven't slept."

I looked at him, at the reddish, bloodshot color of his eyes, at his sunken cheeks.

"Why don't you sleep now?" I suggested. "I'll watch."

He looked at me eagerly. "You're safe. It can't come in unless you're asleep, or unless you invite it in. I've learned that. But if anything happens, wake me!"

I nodded. "It'll be all right. Don't worry."

Exhausted, he lay back and closed his eyes. He fell asleep almost at once.

Outside it had begun to snow, and the soft, heavy flakes made a steady rustling against the window. I looked out curiously; I noticed that the window had been nailed shut and the crevices stuffed with putty and painted over. I went outside impulsively and looked at the bedroom windows. They too were nailed and puttied tight, and I saw that the whole back end of the house had been freshly painted.

"He's got those two rooms airtight and watertight, all right," I thought.

Back in the kitchen again, I remembered, uneasily, that I was supposed to be on watch. But nothing had happened. Hans still slept, the fire still burned softly, the snow drifted and fell away from the black window-pane.

And then, abruptly as a flash of lightning striking into the room, the whole calmness with which I had surrounded myself, my whole sense of security, vanished as though it had never been. Not that there was any physical happening. There was nothing, in that sense. But there was a sudden, sweeping realization that some mighty, malignant force had turned its whole attention upon the house.

I SAT up sharply and walked to the door, where I stood listening. There was no sound from outside, and the snow, I could see out of the corner of my eye as I half glanced at the window, was still falling steadily. I waited, perhaps five minutes. And still that terrible awareness of some horrible force overhanging, impending, persisted. Then I threw the door wide, and stepped out upon the back porch. But nothing was there.

I turned back into the kitchen. And then I saw, fleetingly, something move at the kitchen window.

The window was beyond the table, beyond the light, beyond Hans' sleeping figure. It was grayish with the constant touching of fingers of snow. And it seemed to me that, for a second, I saw something slipping down the window-pane, something that clung to the pane like a colorless jelly, almost like a wave of watery foam, almost like a nothingness that moved heavily down the window-pane and disappeared below the sill.

The glimpse, or vision, whatever it was, was fragmentary. I remember that I thought, even as I crossed the floor toward the window to look out, that it might well be illusion. But when I reached the window I paused stock-still, pondering.

The snow had been wiped cleanly from the sill, better than it could have been done with a broom. And I realized that here at last was evidence, physical evidence, that something had been pressed down upon the sill, a few moments ago, for I could yet count the flakes as they fell thickly upon the still bare wood.

My lips moving unconsciously while I uttered soundless words, I stood there, watching the snow fall rustling upon the sill until the wood was again unbrokenly sheathed with white. *Something* had swept that snow away!

I went outdoors again, and stood again outside the window in the snow. I looked down, and at my feet the snow had been packed down. And, leading away from the house for a short distance, I saw a sharply marked track, like the trail that

might be made by rolling a large ball. And beyond the rectangle of light that the window loosed into the snow-ridden gloom, that track became a trail of human footprints!

Then my courage deserted me. Only one thought remained in my mind, to get back into that house as fast as I could. I got back into the kitchen at once.

Hans was awake. The cold air from the open door had roused him. He looked at me, at first uncomprehendingly, then alertly, and I saw that he knew, pretty well, what had happened. He sat up, stretching muscles stiff from sleeping half erect in a chair.

"Did someone come to the door?" he asked.

I shook my head, pointing to the window. "There was a sort of gray fog against the window. It lasted only a moment. I went outside. There are tracks in the snow."

Hans looked at me queerly. "Tracks like nothing on earth, or human tracks?"

My voice was harsh and high-pitched as I answered, "Tracks like—both!"

As the day slowly lightened, Hans stripped the molding of wax from the bedroom door, shaped it between his hands, and affixed it to the lump behind the woodbox. I left the house before Hilda awoke, and returned to the village.

At twilight I drove my car again into the Brubaker yard, and walked to the house, grayish, apprehensive-seeming in the falling darkness. Entering the house I realized at once that Hans had told Hilda everything. Stamped on the faces and engraved in the speech of both man and wife was a determination to fight the thing that threatened their home.

Hilda—brave girl!—brought out a pinoche deck. But before we could sit down to play there came an interruption.

A car turned into the driveway, pulled up beside the house, and a farmer came in, a man named Brandt, who lived near by. He shook his head when Hans asked him to sit down.

"My Bertha!" he stammered eagerly; "have you seen anything of her?"

I felt a tingle of fear.

"She's gone! She's run away—she's been going around too much with that Irish Catholic, Fagan. I put my foot down. 'I'll run away, papa!' she told me. And now she's done it. She's gone. Did she walk to town? Two miles?"

"It's a bad night out," Hilda said doubtfully.

"I think that if you inquire at the houses along the road you'll probably find her," I said.

Presently the man went out. "Do you think it was—that?" Hans asked, when he had gone.

I shook my head. It was perfectly plain what had happened.

We began to play pinochle. And nothing out of the ordinary occurred. The malignant influence seemed to have departed the vicinity, the house seemed more than usually cozy and peaceful, and from time to time I caught myself wondering if, after all, I might not be acting like a fool.

3

The next night also, nothing happened. Hans, with his first-hand knowledge of the thing, suggested that it had "fed" elsewhere, and that there would be a quiescent period. And, feeling that I was neglecting my practise, I stayed away from the farm for a few days. But, late Saturday afternoon, I found a note from Hans.

"It has come back," he had written.

After supper I took my car and drove out to Brubaker Farm. There had been a heavy thaw which had held on for sev-

eral days; the roads were mere ribbons of mud and dirty ice.

Both husband and wife looked inhumanly tired. I noticed that Hans had not shaved for two or three days.

"We didn't want to trouble you," he told me. "We've slept a little, in the daytime, taking turns. But even in the day we can feel the thing near the house. And we're deathly tired."

"Sit quietly and don't speak," Hilda said softly, "and you will feel it."

I sat as she had asked, and, striking inward at me, I could sense the same crawling horror that I had known before. I looked at the others.

"Yes, I can feel it. But Hans—Hilda—you're utterly exhausted. Lie down now and rest. I'll watch."

Hans nodded eagerly toward Hilda.

"Lie down and try to sleep, darling. Doctor Kurt will sit up with me. It will be safe."

Hilda stood up uncertainly and went into the bedroom. I poured out half a tumblerful of brandy, diluted it with water, and made Hans drain the glass. The liquor seemed to strengthen him, and I talked.

"We can beat this thing in two ways, Hans. We know that it is a mass of dead-alive cells controlled by a deathless malign entity. The Slavic peoples had the right idea when they, as they thought, trapped vampires in their coffins, drove stakes through their hearts, and sealed the coffins. What they did not truly realize was the nature of the being they combated. Because the thing is half physical it has, to an extent, physical limitations. It must sleep. And what, in effect, those old-timers did was to catch their vampire asleep and seal it in a box which, fortunately, happened to be strong enough to resist its physical strength. The stake through the heart meant nothing. It was the airtight, solid coffin that did the business, restrained the thing until, as its physical substance slowly died, so was its spirit rendered homeless.

"Now we know that this entity is strongly attracted to this particular vicinity. In the course of time it will find a permanent place where it can sleep, a barrel, perhaps, or a cistern, or an old trunk, or even a casket, if there's such a thing available. And, if we can find that hiding-place and, while the thing is within, seal its receptacle hermetically tight, we will have beaten it.

"There is yet another way to beat the thing, Hans. That way is for someone to invite it to absorb him, if it can. The entity will try, Hans, for it knows nothing of fear. Then, if the man's will is greater, the man will win. Otherwise the thing will absorb him, continue to grow, and he will cease to exist."

Hans' eyes were closed. But when I stopped speaking he roused himself enough to mutter, "I'm—falling—asleep." Then his head drooped forward heavily.

Leisurely, I opened a book, and began to read. A night of wakefulness lay ahead.

The hours slipped slowly by. I could hear Hilda, through the half-opened bedroom door, breathing slowly and deeply. Hans, beside me, snored irregularly.

It was close to three when I heard footsteps sloshing up the driveway, passing around behind the house, hesitating, slowly ascending the steps. Then a knock.

Looking back now I think that, at that moment, I was horribly afraid, even though a revolver lay on the table and I certainly had no lurking fear that the thing would walk up to the house like that.

My body chilled with fear, I opened the door. And then I exclaimed with relief, for, outside on the porch, bedraggled with mud and slush, stood eighteen-year-

old Bertha Brandt. She wore a shapeless, dirty, unpressed coat. When she saw me she shrank back away from the door.

"Bertha, you poor kid! Come in, and dry out those wringing wet clothes and tell me what's wrong."

I noticed that she looked curiously at Hans.

"There's been sickness," I explained, hurriedly. "Nothing serious—Hans has been up two or three nights." I looked at her squarely. "So you're back!"

She glanced at me timidly. "You know, then, that I ran away?"

"Yes, I knew—but here, sit down by the fire. There, take off your coat."

Suddenly, for some unaccountable reason, I remembered *why* I was at Brubaker's at three o'clock in the morning; I remembered all that Hans had told me about the strange white cat, about the dog that looked like Nan, about the boy who had wandered down the road. . . . I laughed, then, at the silliness of it.

"This is Bertha, all right," I told myself. "She's the same girl she always was, right as rain, except that she's a little tired."

And, almost aping my thought, Bertha said, "Could I lie down beside Hilda? I daren't go home tonight . . . I daren't!"

I was pottering around the stove with my back turned toward the girl, trying to warm over some coffee. "Lie down beside Hilda?" I said absently. "In a minute . . . in a minute."

I WENT to the corner cupboard and found a cup and saucer. Then I poured out the coffee, doctored it plentifully with milk and sugar, and turned back to Bertha. She was not in the room.

"Bertha?" I called, softly.

The crawling, cold sensation had begun again at the base of my spine. To my inexpressible relief her voice answered from the bedroom. "Here, Doctor Kurt. I'm *so* tired!"

"Come and get your coffee. Then you can lie down and rest. What you need now is food."

"I know," she answered slowly. "But I'm *so* tired. And you said that 'in a minute' I could lie down with Hilda. It's been a minute."

Just like a child! But I was impatient. "You mustn't lie on Hilda's bed while you're all dirty. You'll have to wash first."

There was a little pause. Then the voice answered, still softly, "Hilda won't mind. Hilda's asleep. Hilda's *sound* asleep."

I went to the doorway and stood there uncertainly, half in gloom, half in brightness. I could see the figures of the two women lying on the bed, close against each other—almost, my imagination told me, melting together.

"Come, Bertha," I said mildly. "You're dirtying Hilda's bed."

There was no answer. As my eyes became more accustomed to the dimness I could see that, there on the bed, there were no longer two women. The two bodies were pressing together like ghastly Siamese twins, dissolving together into one.

My heart, in that instant, froze like a lump of ice. Somehow, my whole body trembling horribly, I leaped across the half-darkened room, knelt on the bed and dug frenzied fingers into the thing that had looked like Bertha and that was now *eating* the sleeping woman, dissolving her as might a powerful acid.

My fingers, beneath the muddy, tattered garments, sank deep, not into the firm flesh of a living girl, but into a yielding mass of protoplasmic slime!

Then I screamed. And, as I fought and tore at the flaccid, jelly-like mess I screamed again and again without pause,

like a madman, without hearing my own voice, knowing only, from the tautness of my throat and the beating of my breath, that I shrieked.

It was like trying to grasp something that would not be grasped. The stuff, beneath the garments, ran like water in a bag. And I saw that the thing was slowly giving up pretense of human shape. The face was changing—the hands and arms and the contours of the body were dissolving. And, in the last second before it melted into shapeless slime, from that vanishing mouth came Bertha Brandt's voice, crying, *"I* didn't do it, Doctor Kurt! I didn't!"

Then the thing was only a mass of jelly, still clinging like some loathsome, colorless leech to Hilda's back and shoulders. My body shrinking, I crawled over it and through it, seized Hilda's arms, and pulled her off the bed onto the floor.

And then I screamed again, for of Hilda there was left only half a body; her spine lay bare, her ribs curved naked-ly, her skull gaped, her entrails drooped across the dingy carpet; it was like a slaughterhouse in hell.

Suddenly the light streaming through the doorway dimmed, and I saw Hans standing there, the gun in his hand. I saw the spurting, red flames, and heard the crash of firing. I saw the pulpy mass on the bed jerk and shiver as each slug tore through it. Then there was silence, yet through the haze of smoke I saw the mess of protoplasmic slime drip slowly off the bed and slide across the floor toward the horrible ruin that had once been a woman. And on my hands and knees I tried to push it back, scooping at it as, unconcernedly, the thing flowed across the floor, between my fingers, and again fastened upon Hilda.

Hans was kneeling beside me. But we couldn't keep the thing away from the dead woman—it wasn't possible.

Then, abruptly, Hans stood up. His face was ghastly white, like the face of a dead man. Without a backward glance he left the corpse, with that awful thing still crawling over it, and went out of the room into the kitchen. And there I saw him take a pat of wax from the woodbox, heat it over the stove, and methodically seal the crevices in the kitchen door, leading out onto the porch.

When he had finished he nodded grimly at me, made a wide gesture that included kitchen and bedroom.

"A coffin, Doctor Kurt," he said slowly. "I have made a coffin of these rooms, and sealed the thing in it. When it is slime it cannot escape. And when it is in the shape of a human being we can fight it, so that it cannot unlock the door."

Then he went back into the bedroom. And, slowly, I followed.

We had been in the iktchen only a few minutes, but in those minutes the horror had finished its ghastly work. Nothing remained of Hilda; only a bag of clothes lay there, limply. And, nestling in them, glistened a great mound of watery, jelly-like stuff, faintly quivering, alertly alive.

Then I saw that Hans had brought matches and strips of newspaper. As I watched, he twisted the paper into spills, lit one, and plunged the flaming mass against the globule of colorless life on the floor!

THE mound of stuff quivered and writhed, and slid swiftly across the floor. As it sought to escape, Hans, his eyes intent, his stubbled jaws grim, followed it about the room, always keeping the blazing paper torches pressed against the shrinking, unholy thing. The air was becoming thick with rancid smoke, and the odor of burning flesh filled the room.

Stumbling, sobbing, together we attacked the horror. Here and there on the

floor and carpet showed brown, charred smears. The thing's silent, sliding attempts to escape were, somehow, more terrible than if it had cried out in agony. The smoke in the room had become a thick haze.

And then the thing seemed to gather purpose. It rolled swiftly across the bedroom floor, stopped upon the disheveled pile of clothes that Hilda had worn and, as we paused to light fresh spills, it changed.

It reared erect as a fountain might gush up. It put forth arms, developed breasts, overspread itself with color. In the time that it might take to draw a long breath the thing had vanished and a something that we knew to be that same ghastly entity, but that looked as Hilda had looked in life, stood naked there amid the jumbled clothes. Swiftly the entity—for I cannot call it by Hilda's name—stooped and drew about itself the skirt and blouse. Then, barefooted and stockingless, it walked into the kitchen.

Like a man awakening from drugged slumber, Hans leaped before the door, held up a blazing spill.

The thing spoke, and the voice was the voice of Hilda. "I want to go out, Hans." It moved forward slightly.

Hans, his features racked, almost unrecognizable, thrust the blazing paper before him menacingly. "You'll never leave this house. We're going to burn you!"

The thing that looked and spoke like Hilda shook its head, and I gasped to see the wavy, fine blond tresses undulate and shimmer with the gesture. And it smiled.

"You'll never burn me, Hans. I'm a prisoner, Hans. You want to destroy the thing that holds me, but you don't want to burn me to death, Hans. For as yet I haven't suffered, except from your fire. I'm Hilda, Hans!"

Then Hans asked hoarsely, and I saw that the fire was burning his fingers, "How can I know?"

The thing smiled. "You can't know, Hans. But if you destroy me, Hilda suffers. Let me go!"

Then Hans shook his head. "No. We will stay here until you starve, until you rot into nothingness."

Came the inexorable reply, "As I suffer, Hilda suffers. As I starve, she starves."

Hans looked at me, and I could see that he was nerving himself toward an incredibility. "Then, by heaven, Doctor Kurt, I will try *the other way!*"

He looked at the entity, at the thing that looked like Hilda.

"Come, Hilda," he said simply. "If you are a prisoner in that thing before me, hear me. I want to join you. I want to join you, and Bertha, and Nan, and God only knows what other unfortunate creatures with souls who have been overcome. But I do not surrender, and I cannot be beaten by guile. Let the thing come and attempt to subdue me. And help me, Hilda and Bertha and all the rest, help me."

He stood there before the door, his arms extended, his body rigid. And then the horror that looked like Hilda slowly moved forward, a smile on its lips, came closer and closer to him, touched him, was enfolded in his arms, lips touching lips. And Hans' strong arms flexed, and in turn it embraced him, a smile on its sweetly beautiful face. And as they stood there, the man and the being whose very nature remains an unanswerable question, I prayed as I have never prayed before, prayed that the good overcome the evil.

For minutes that seemed hours they stood there, motionless. Treading softly, I moved a step forward, and I caught a glimpse of the thing's eyes. And

I was comforted, for I seemed to read in them something of humanity that could not have come to them through guile; I sensed that in truth those others who had been engulfed were fighting on the side of the man.

And, as I watched, the horror seemed to become frailer and weaker, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, as, before my eyes, the semblance of Hilda faded into nothingness and only Hans remained, holding tightly clasped in his arms a crumpled skirt and blouse. And even yet for long minutes Hans did not move, and I sensed that still some metamorphosis went on, some change invisible to human eyes.

But at last Hans moved, and, looking at the bundle of clothes in his arms as might an awakened sleeper, he stroked them tenderly and put them gently down on the table.

At last he spoke to me, and his voice was the voice of the man I had known, but immeasurably more beautiful, immeasurably more strong.

"We worked together, we fought together, Hilda and Bertha and those unfortunate boys and Nan—and you, Doctor Kurt, too. And we have won."

He walked across the floor to the center of the room, and I watched the stout boards give beneath his weight. "And yet I can feel the thing inside me, like a devilish flame that would eat me if it could. It is in me, and I think that it cannot escape. I pray that it never overcome me and escape."

Then he looked at me thoughtfully. "In the eyes of the town, Doctor Kurt, there is a mystery here. Hilda is gone, and Bertha Brandt, and the Peterson boy. So you must go to your home, and you must say that you have been visiting me, and that I am insane. As for me, I will leave a note and go away. And the people will believe that I am a murderer, and that I have run away."

I bowed my head silently. He spoke the truth. He must go away. And the world would believe him a butchering maniac.

For a long time he did not speak, but stood there silently, his head sunk upon his breast, as he thought. Then, "I will walk to your car with you. I thank you—we all thank you—for what you have done. Probably I shall never see you again."

He led me from the house. Then I was sitting in the car, the motor running softly, while Hans stood there before me in the damp snow. He extended his hand.

"Good-bye!"

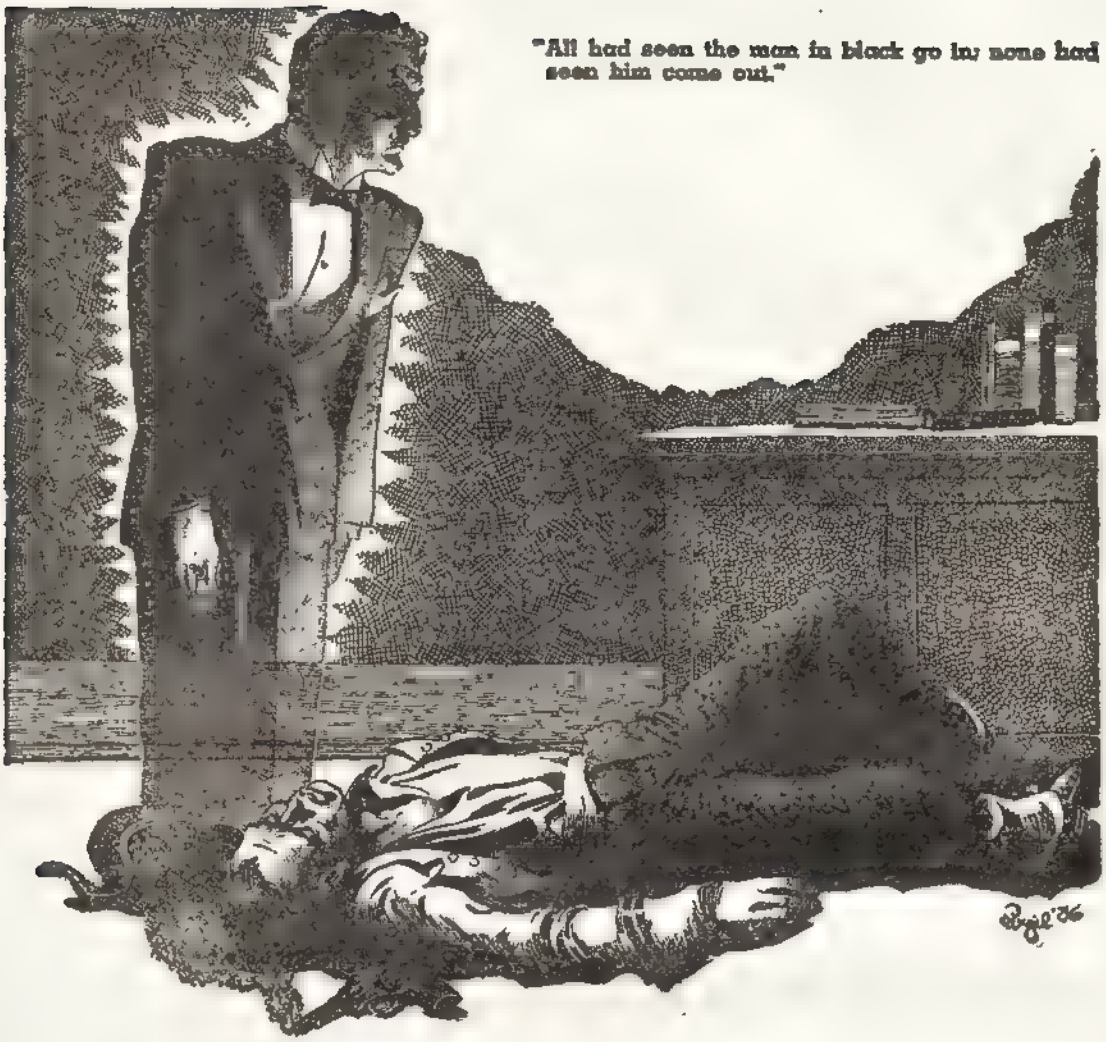
"Good-bye," I said inanely.

And, while yet he stood there in the snow beside the house I drove away.

THUS it is that our village believes that Hans murdered with bloodthirsty abandon and then, fearing detection, mysteriously escaped.

I alone know the truth, and the truth weighs heavily upon me. And so I have begun to prepare a record of the true happenings in the Brubaker case, and presently I shall see that this record is brought before the proper authorities.

Meanwhile I wonder: where, and *what*, is Hans?



"All had seen the man in black go in; none had seen him come out."

The Man in Black

By PAUL ERNST

A vivid weird tale about a masquerade ball, and a grim figure clad in formal black, who mingled with the dancers but did not dance

THERE is a feeling of anonymity about a masquerade ball that leads to license. Your face is covered. No one knows who you are. You feel that you can do as you please because your identity is hidden away. The fact that unmasking time is always just a short period ahead is forgotten.

This feeling, plus the fact that the friends of Rex Carr were men and wo-

men who weren't too prudish anyhow, was turning the masquerade party at Carr's recently acquired home into something approaching an orgy.

An air of feverish gayety prevailed. Men in colorful costumes, with masks making their faces unrecognizable, were a little drunk and more than a little indiscreet. Women in costumes designed to enhance the perfection of their bodies laughed shrilly at advances they might normally have repulsed. Cheeks were stained with hectic red, and talk was loud and incessant.

But near the French doors leading out onto the terrace there were two, a man and a girl, whose faces were pale and whose voices were low and strained.

The girl was tall, slender but mature in figure. She was dressed in a pirate's costume whose slashed breeches and torn silk blouse resulted in ivory revelations. She might as well not have been masked. Her hair, the color of bright new copper, was the kind not one woman in a hundred thousand possesses. It labeled her at once as Ruth Dana, daughter of Ralph Dana, an independent coal mine owner.

The man with her was in a tramp's tatters that could not destroy an impression of innate immaculateness. He was a head taller than Ruth Dana, though she was a tall girl; and had the rangy, wiry lines of a thoroughbred animal—which he was. For this was Mattson Danforth, whose family had been well bred and wealthy when Indians still roamed in Massachusetts.

Ruth Dana shivered suddenly, though the breeze coming in the French doors was warm.

"I've got the horrors, Matt," she said. Her voice was low, throaty, musical.

"I'd imagine you would have," nodded the man.

The black mask over his eyes and the high bridge of his nose accentuated the pallor of his face. He was plainly under a terrific strain.

"If I were a girl, and were here in Rex Carr's house in the circumstances under which you're here, I'd have the horrors too," he said.

"It's not altogether that," Ruth replied. "I'm trying not to think of that any more than I can help. It's something else. There's something dreadful about this house, Matt."

"There's something obscene about giving a masquerade ball in it so soon," snapped Mattson Danforth. "Rex Carr is a murderer, dancing on Hugh Cunningham's grave."

With fingers that shook a little, Ruth put lipstick on lips that were all too pallid.

"Everybody knows Carr got this house, and all Cunningham's other possessions, through a business swindle that was as crooked as it was legal. Carr double-crossed Cunningham, who trusted him implicitly. He stripped Cunningham to his shirt, and laughed as he did it. Then Hugh killed himself, blew his brains out. And I hear Carr laughed again when he heard that, and said that a man as trusting as Cunningham ought not to run around loose anyhow. And now Carr has the brass to give a drunken party in Hugh's house less than a month after Hugh's death."

"He'll hear you," said Ruth, biting her lip.

"I hope he does. But he wouldn't be hearing anything new. He knows how I feel about the affair. And he certainly must know how I feel—about him and you."

For an instant the iron self-restraint Danforth was imposing on himself almost cracked.

"It's almost impossible to believe the situation," he said. "It's the kind of

thing you see on the stage or read in the old novels—never the kind of thing you expect to happen. A man with the soul of a pirate, having grabbed everything else he wanted by sheer force, now sets out to grab a wife. He sees you, maneuvers your father into a position of business dependence before he ever meets you—then says you'll marry him or see your father ruined as Hugh Cunningham was ruined. It's fantastic."

"But it seems to be true," said Ruth, gazing out at the terrace.

"Yes," said Danforth, "it—seems to be—true."

Sweat was beading his forehead above the mask, but his lips smiled as generations of breeding clamped down on his suffering.

"You haven't changed your mind about my killing him?" he said, lighting a cigarette with thin, steely fingers that did not shake.

Ruth shook her head, hand at her throat. "For God's sake——"

"I won't, I guess," said Danforth. "We talked it over pretty thoroughly, and it wouldn't be a practical solution. I'd only drag us all through the papers, and get myself electrocuted or put behind bars for life, and you'd be even worse off than you'll be as Carr's wife—if that's possible——"

He stopped, and stared. Ruth's gaze followed his. He was looking at a man in a plain black suit whose only concession to the spirit of the masquerade was the standard mask worn over the upper half of his face. The lower part of his countenance was bluish, as though he were on the edge of needing a shave.

"Who's that?" said Danforth. "I've been watching him all evening. He seems to be alone, though Carr never invites any but couples, and as far as I can see he hasn't said a word to a soul in the hour he has been here."

Ruth shook her bright-copper head. "I haven't the faintest idea. We can find out at twelve when we all unmask. Shall we dance?"

"Join Carr in dancing on Hugh Cunningham's grave?" said Danforth. "I'd rather not. Come out to the terrace with me, darling. There's much to say and not much time to say it in. For I'll never dare to see you after you're—married to Carr. If I did, they'd be holding the electrocution party after all."

The mask hid the drops that welled from Ruth's eyes and spilled over her long lashes as she walked out onto the terrace with him.

At the entrance between reception hall and library, Rex Carr, host of the party, stood. He was watching a silent, tall figure dressed in a plain black business suit. He frowned a little, and beckoned arrogantly to his butler, who was hurrying toward the library with a great tray of drinks.

The man came up to him, obedience in his stooped body, hate in his faded blue eyes.

"Parke," said Carr, nodding toward the black-clad figure, "who the devil is that?"

"I don't know, sir," said the butler.

"Oh, you don't!" Carr's voice was loud enough for several people near by to hear. "Well, what do you think you're paid for—to let strangers crash my parties?"

"You looked over the invitations yourself as they were presented at the door, sir," said the butler expressionlessly.

"But I can't be out watching the garden hedge, or the front gate, can I?" rasped Carr. "I don't like people here I can't recognize."

"But there must be many here you can't recognize with masks on, sir," the man pointed out the obvious.

Carr's muddy brown eyes glared redly through the eye-holes of his mask.

"When I want your ideas I'll ask for them, Parke! I've a damn good notion to fire you."

He stopped, and slowly a smile spread over his face. It was not a pleasant smile.

"But you'd like to be fired, wouldn't you, Parke?"

"Yes, sir," said Parke.

"You hate me, and hate working for me, don't you?"

The man's knuckles whitened over the edge of the tray he was holding.

"Yes, sir," he said expressionlessly.

"But you wouldn't care to quit or give me poor service, would you, Parke?" Carr said almost affably. "Not as long as I hold the mortgage on the little apartment building that was to support you and your wife in your old age—and as long as you are four payments behind!"

Carr clasped his hands behind his back. It was an incongruous position. He was clad in pirate's rig, too. But the posture was hardly that of a pirate, nor was his pudgy body.

"You get the best service out of people whose throat you can cut at any time," he said genially. "It's a lesson I learned early. If you want something, get the whip hand over the man who owns it or something else he holds equally valuable. Then squeeze. The results are excellent. . . ."

His mock geniality faded.

"You find out who the hell that man in black is," he ordered. "He looks like an undertaker. Then tell Miss Dana I want to speak to her."

"Here, sir?" said the butler.

"No, in the small den."

Carr walked across the hall from the library, and toward the rear of the house. A door was there, closed. Carr took out a key and unlocked it. He walked into the ten-by-ten, book-lined den in which Hugh Cunningham had spent much of his leisure time; in which, indeed, he had shot himself when he realized that every dollar he owned was now Carr's.

But Carr didn't mind that. He was not a nervous man. He wanted a room in which to talk to Ruth Dana alone.

He closed the door behind him, and strode to the mantel above the tiny fireplace. There was a picture there, a picture of Cunningham.

Carr stared at it with narrowed eyes. The picture was that of a man of forty or so, with a kindly, not very rugged face. The artist might have made the face look stronger; but he had obviously been commissioned to paint Cunningham as he was and not as he ought to be. There was even a mole the size of a dime on the jaw of the pictured face, just as there had been a mole on Cunningham's face in life.

"I'll have to take you down, old man," Carr muttered, with a careless shrug. "You don't belong here any more——"

He turned quickly as he heard the door open. Then he smiled as ingratiatingly as he could.

Ruth Dana stood on the threshold, bright-copper hair like a banner in the comparative dimness of the den.

"You wanted to see me?" she said, in a dead, dull voice.

"Yes," said Carr briskly. "Come in. Come in. Close the door behind you. Tightly. That's it. It locks when it's closed tightly. And we don't want anyone interrupting us, do we?"

Ruth did not reply. Carr hurried over the implications of her silence.

"You look charming in that pirate's costume, my dear. I asked you to wear it to match my own costume, as you can see. Mr. and Mrs. Pirate!" He laughed breezily. "But what I called you—asked you, I mean—here to talk about was that

very thing. I'd like to announce our marriage date tonight, if I may."

"You'd announce it whether you may or not, wouldn't you?" said Ruth.

"Now, now, I'm not as impulsive as all that."

"Announce it tonight, or any other time," Ruth shrugged. "We might as well get it over with quickly."

"That's not a very nice tone of voice to use," said Carr plaintively.

"It's the only tone you'll ever hear from me," Ruth said quietly. "You're making me marry you to save my father. You're to give me as a wedding present the lien that you own on his mine. Business, Mr. Carr. Business. I'm sure business men don't care about such things as tones of voice."

"By God," Carr said thickly, "I've a notion to squeeze your father till you sing another tune. But I won't. I'll take you, my dear, on your own terms. But—I'll take you! Use any tone of voice you please—now. You'll learn a different one later. . . ."

CARR's voice trailed off to silence. He stared over Ruth's shoulder, toward the doorway. So intent was his stare that she turned too, involuntarily, to see what he was looking at.

There was a man in the open doorway. He was tall, dressed in black. His hand on the edge of the opened door was made to seem waxen, white, by a large black seal ring he wore on the middle finger.

"Who . . . who are you?" stammered Carr, so enraged he could not talk straight. "And what the devil are you doing in here?"

The man on the threshold said nothing. He stared at Carr. At least his face was turned that way; the light was so dim in the den that his eyes could not be seen. The eyeholes of his mask seemed to be blank, black pockets.

"Answer me!" snapped Carr. "Who are you? And how did you get in here? That door was locked."

The man walked slowly toward Carr. Ruth shuddered, for what reason she knew not. The figure in the black suit stopped beside Carr at the mantel.

His left hand, with the black ring on it, went out. His forefinger touched a raised spot in the scrollwork of the mantel.

Carr's right hand was raised to clutch the man by the shoulder. But his hand never descended. He gasped, and stared with bulging eyes at the mantel.

At the touch of the man's finger, a concealed drawer had slid out. In the drawer was a gun—a .38 automatic. The man picked up the gun.

"For God's sake," babbled Carr, "who are you? Are you going to shoot——"

The man acted as though he had not heard. He walked from the fireplace to the flat-topped desk near by, and laid the automatic on the desk blotter. Then he walked from the room.

It was as he turned that Carr's face, pale with fright, really went white. For as he turned, the dim light of the small den showed a disfiguration on the left side of his jaw: a mole the size of a dime.

"Do you . . . do you know who he was?" Carr gasped.

Ruth stared deep into his eyes. Her own eyes were wide with a fear that went beyond hysteria.

"I—don't—know," she whispered. "That ring! I——"

She stopped. Carr grasped her bare shoulder.

"Well? Well? What about the ring?"

"I've seen only one ring like that in my life—a big, black seal ring made of jet. It belonged to—Hugh Cunningham."

Carr's breath escaped explosively from his lungs.

"Well, that means some relative of Cunningham's must have sneaked in here tonight — somebody who knows this house well enough to work that secret compartment, and to whom Cunningham left his personal effects——"

"Hugh had no near relatives," said Ruth, her voice strained and brittle. "As for the ring—he was buried with it on his hand."

Carr's fingers left prints in Ruth's white shoulder.

"Good God! Do you know what you're saying? You're intimating that that man in black was——"

He swallowed convulsively, and ran to the door. It was locked, and he had to get out his key to open it. He jerked it open with trembling hands. Parke was near the door, in the hall. A dozen feet away was the man in black, walking toward the front of the house.

"Parke," Carr called. "That man not in costume—in the black suit—get him!"

"Yes, sir," said Parke. "And then what, sir?"

"Put him out!" rasped Carr, his voice shaking. "No . . . wait! First take his mask off."

"Very good, sir," said Parke.

He started toward the man in black, now at the library entrance with his back turned to the two.

"Wait!" shrilled Carr.

Parke turned.

"I——" faltered Carr. "I'm not enough interested in him to care who he is. Don't take his mask off. I don't want to see his face. Just show him out."

"Yes, sir," said Parke.

But when he turned back down the hall, the man in black was gone.

Carr went back into the small den. First he stared at the gun the man in black had wordlessly left on the desk; then he gazed at the portrait of the man who had blown his brains out here before this fireplace. He gazed longest at the mole, the size of a dime, on the pictured jaw. Then, with a defiant half-sneer, he poured himself a large drink.

"I'm getting soft-headed," he muttered. "To think even for a minute——"

He poured another drink and downed that, too.

At the French doors Danforth started out to the terrace, then stepped aside just in time to avoid being bumped into by a man running in.

"What the deuce, Gray!" Danforth said. "You're in quite a hurry——"

He broke off as he saw the pallor on Gray's face. Gray, a stout man with a color that was normally high, stared at him out of an ashy countenance.

"My God, I've just had a start!" he panted. "A man in a black suit—out there in the garden——"

"What about him?" said Danforth.

"The way he was acting! I was out near the hedge, just strolling. I saw this figure ahead of me. A man in dark clothes. At first I thought he was a trespasser, because he isn't in costume. Then I saw the mask, and started to go up to him. But I stopped when I saw the strange way he was acting. Or, rather, the *familiar* way he was acting! He was walking up to trees and sort of patting them, and staring around with his hands in his pockets, and once I saw him stoop and pick up a bit of paper that was littering the lawn."

"Well?" Danforth said.

"Well—he was acting as if he owned this place. Or as if he *had* owned it at one time."

"I don't get you," said Danforth.

Gray looked at him with eyes that protruded slightly from his chubby face.

"Matt, he was acting *as I've seen Hugh Cunningham act a hundred times around*

here! You have, too. You've seen Hugh walk up to a tree and pat it as if it was a live thing that he loved. You've seen him stare around with his hands in his pockets, and take deep breaths, as if he couldn't get enough of the air of the place he owned. You've seen how fussy he was about cigar butts or bits of paper on his lawn."

Danforth shook his head a little.

"Watch your drinks, Gray. You're taking too much aboard. The dead don't walk."

"I . . . of course not." Gray mopped at his forehead. "But it gave me a jolt for a minute. Who do you suppose the man is?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Danforth. "But it certainly isn't—well, Hugh lies in his grave with the entire upper half of his face blown away."

"Yes, yes, I know," sighed Gray. "But I wish I knew who. . . . In spite of the masks, most of us have an idea who most of the rest are. But I haven't the faintest notion who the man in black——"

Danforth saw Ruth across the floor from him. He left Gray and walked toward her. Her face was even paler than it had been before.

GRAY's quandary about the man in black was becoming a general one, Danforth discovered as he crossed the floor. He passed three groups who were talking of him.

"I've seen a mole on someone's jaw like the mole on his," he heard a woman say. "I can't quite remember who——"

"Maybe he's a private detective," a man said. "But I wish he wouldn't tiptoe around as he does. He gives me the creeps. At one moment he's nowhere in sight; at the next he's at your elbow, staring around as if he owned the place."

Another, almost as pale as Gray, echoed Gray's sentiments.

"I'd have sworn, if I didn't know he was six feet underground, that that was Hugh Cunningham——"

Danforth got to Ruth. He caught her hand in his, then released it as she stared at him without seeming to see him. There was horror in her eyes. Then they focussed on him.

"Matt," she said in a low tone, "do you believe in ghosts?"

"Don't you start in on the man in black, too," Danforth began. Then he stopped. Her face was frightening in its pallor.

"So others have wondered about him!" she said. "At least I'm not the only one. . . . He came into the small den while Rex and I were in it. The room where—Hugh shot himself. He opened a secret drawer in the mantel and took out a gun. You remember everyone wondered where Hugh had got the gun he shot himself with? Well, now I know. From the concealed drawer. He must have had a pair of them there."

"Ruth, darling, you're overwrought——"

"Matt," Ruth interrupted quietly, "who else on earth but Hugh Cunningham would have known about the secret drawer? And who else would have taken out a gun, staring significantly at Rex Carr all the time, and have laid it on the desk as if bidding him to use it?"

"Did the man in black do that?" exclaimed Danforth.

"He did. Now, I'd like to know—*who is he?*"

Danforth looked at his watch. "We'll know in a few minutes. We're to unmask at twelve. And it's nearly that now. But you'll find that the man in black is merely some acquaintance of Carr's that none of us have met before."

"Rex doesn't know who he is himself!" said Ruth. "He——"

She stopped. The figure of their host

had appeared in the doorway. He swayed uncertainly, a pudgy man in pirate's costume who was very, very drunk.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said thickly, "I have an announcement to make. It concerns a certain charming young lady here tonight, and myself."

The rest turned to face him. Conversation died.

"How did he get so drunk so quickly?" whispered Danforth to Ruth.

She only shook her head and stared wide-eyed at Carr, who went tipsily on:

"But first, before the announcement, there are two things that must happen. The first is—unmasking. In a moment, ladies and gentlemen, all will take off their masks—and you can see who has been making love to who. The second is——" He stared unsteadily around. "There's a man in a black suit in the house somewhere that I want to ask some questions of!" His jaw went out truculently. "He's the second thing that happens before the announcement. The rest of you will unmask in here. The man in black will come into my den with me, and unmask there—before I throw him out of the house. He's been a—nuisance!"

Carr glared at those in the room as if daring them to take exception to anything he had said. Nobody spoke.

"Where's the man in black?" he said loudly.

All glanced at one another. There were no hectically flushed cheeks now. Every man and woman in the house had seen and remarked on the man in black who had talked to no one, seemed to have come with no one, and was a sable mystery. Few had known Hugh Cunningham well enough to know of the black seal ring, but practically all of them knew of the mole on his jaw, and had remarked on the mole on the face of this man whom nobody knew.

"Where is he?" repeated Carr belligerently. "If anyone knows, let him speak up!"

Ruth shivered.

"*If that was Hugh, in black, and Rex* got him into the den and . . . and had him unmask——"

Danforth grinned bleakly. "The mask would just about cover the damage his bullet did to his face," he said. "I imagine it would be far from a nice sight. But of course——"

Carr turned. The doorway he was standing in led to the hall. All in the big front room saw him glare down the hall toward the rear of the house. All heard him bellow: "You, there! You in the black! I want to see you. This is a masquerade party, but that doesn't mean that some practical joker can come here with a black ring on his finger and a fake mole on his jaw and masquerade as—as someone else."

CARR turned and hurried down the hall. The rest went to the door.

All saw the back of the man in black—saw Carr open the door of the small den.

"All right," Carr called back. "Everybody take off his mask. I'll join you as soon as I see who this——"

The door closed behind him. He had entered the small den with the man in black walking in front of him.

For a moment the crowd stood in silence. Then a man let out an explosive sigh.

"I don't blame Carr for getting drunk before he took on a job like that," he said. "Whoever the man in black is, he just came here to get Carr's goat. Of course! What else could it be? And if I was Carr, under the circumstances, he'd have gotten mine. Well, everybody, how about the masks?"

All unmasked. A few had made love

to the wrong people and were confused, exasperated or amused according to temperament. But exclamations were perfunctory. Everyone was too conscious of the two in the den to concentrate on much else.

Carr—and the man in black! The man who at first, because of his plain clothes, had been thought not to be in costume at all; but who now, in the light of the evening's developments, could be seen to have worn the subtlest masquerade of any!

Danforth clutched Ruth's hand.

"Something dreadful is going to happen," she whispered to him. Her hand was icy cold. "I can feel it——"

"It'll happen, all right, if I don't leave here pretty soon," said Danforth, eyes bleak. "I can feel that electrocution party drawing nearer all the time. If only I could scrape another hundred thousand from the Danforth coffers so that we could tell Carr where to go——"

A scream ripped out. As though a man's very soul were escaping in horrified sound from his palsied lips, it rang through the house. And all turned again toward the door of the little room down the hall. For the scream had been Carr's; and it had come from the den.

Again the scream sounded, freezing the nerves. Then the frantic cry: "No, no, for God's sake! Not any more! Put the mask back on——"

Danforth was among the first to reach the door. He battered at it, found it locked.

"Carr! Carr—what's wrong?"

That was Gray shouting. But there was no answer. It was as though the man in the den could not hear—though he must have heard through the comparatively thin door.

"No!" Carr's shriek came again. *"I can't stand it! Get back to Hell where you belong——"*

Then silence. Black, thick silence, in which the men outside stared at one another with wide, dazed eyes.

"Carr!" Gray called again, in a voice that was hoarse with horror.

And then it came. The sound of a single shot, hideously muffled.

"The man in black—he shot Carr!" babbled Gray. "Get him—hold him for the police——"

They broke the door down.

CARR lay before the mantel with his dead face turned up toward the portrait of Hugh Cunningham. He lay on his back, which was fortunate, because he had put the muzzle of the automatic in his mouth before pulling the trigger. His face was all right, but the back of his head was better hidden.

He was alone in the den.

"The man in black——" faltered Gray, staring around.

The hall door was the only entrance into the room. All had seen the man in black go in. None had seen him come out. But he was not in the room now.

Danforth stared for a long time, first at the portrait of Cunningham, with the mole on its jaw, then at Carr's dead face. Then he left the room of death.

Ruth came to him, trembling, eyes asking a terrified question.

Danforth nodded. "Shot himself. And I'm glad, darling. You hear? Glad!"

"The—the man in black?" whispered Ruth.

Danforth stared back into the den, at the ring of white-faced men around the corpse.

"I think," he said, "we'd better just forget about him when we're questioned by the police, and others. Carr killed himself in a drunken fit of remorse. That's a statement that will be easier to—explain."

"I questioned him closely as to the subject of these dreams."

The Dark Demon

By ROBERT BLOCH

The strange story of a man who communed too closely with things from beyond space—a shuddery tale of stark horror

IT HAS never been put on paper before—the true story of Edgar Gordon's death. As a matter of fact, nobody but myself knows that he *is* dead; for people have gradually forgotten about the strange dark genius whose eldritch tales were once so popular among fantasy-lovers everywhere. Perhaps it was his later work which so alienated the public—the nightmare hints and outlandish fancies of his final books. Many people branded the extravagantly worded tomes as the work of a madman, and even his correspondents refused to comment on some of the unpublished stuff he sent them. Then too, his furtive and eccentric private life was not wholesomely regarded by those who knew him in the days of his early success. Whatever the cause, he and his writings have been doomed

to oblivion by a world which always ignores what it cannot quite understand. Now everyone who does remember thinks that Gordon has merely disappeared. That is good, in view of the peculiar way in which he died. But I have decided to tell the truth. You see, I knew Gordon very well. I was, truthfully, the last of all his friends, and I was there at the end. I owe him a debt of gratitude for all he has done for me, and how could I more fittingly repay it than to give to the world the true facts concerning his sad mental metamorphosis and tragic death?

If I can hope to clarify these things, and clear Gordon's name from the unjust stigma of insanity, I feel that I have not lived in vain. Therefore, this statement is indited.

I am quite aware that this story may not be believed. There are certain—shall we say, "sensational aspects"?—which have caused me to debate the step I am taking in laying his case before the public. But I have a debt to repay; a tribute, rather, to the genius that once was Edgar Henquist Gordon. Hence, the tale.

It must have been six years ago that I first met him. I had not even known that we both resided in the same city, until a mutual correspondent inadvertently mentioned the fact in a letter.

I had, of course, heard of him before. Being a hopeful (and at times, hopeless) amateur writer myself, I was enormously influenced and impressed by his work in the various magazines catering to the fantastic literature I loved. At this time he was known in a small way to practically all readers of such journals as an exceptionally erudite writer of horror tales. His style had won him renown in this small field, though even then there were those who professed to scoff at the grotesquery of his themes.

But I ardently admired him. As a result, I invited myself to pay a social call upon Mr. Gordon at his home. We became friends.

Surprizingly enough, this reclusive dreamer seemed to enjoy my company. He lived alone, cultivated no acquaintances, and had no contact with his friends save through correspondence. His mailing-list, however, was voluminous. He exchanged letters with authors and editors all over the country; would-be writers, aspiring journalists, and thinkers and students everywhere. Once his reserve was penetrated, he seemed pleased to have my friendship. Needless to say, I was delighted.

What Edgar Gordon did for me in the next three years can never adequately be told. His able assistance, friendly criticism and kind encouragement finally succeeded in making a writer of sorts out of me, and after that our mutual interest formed an added bond between us.

What he revealed about his own magnificent stories astounded me. Yet I might have suspected something of the sort from the first.

Gordon was a tall, thin, angular man with the pale face and deep-set eyes which bespeak the dreamer. His language was poetic and profound; his personal mannerisms were almost somnambulistic in their weaving slowness, as though the mind which directed his mechanical movements was alien and far away. From these signs, therefore, I might have guessed his secret. But I did not, and was properly astonished when he first told me.

For Edgar Gordon wrote all of his stories from dreams! The plot, setting, and characters were products of his own colorful dream life—all he need do was transcribe his sleeping fancies on paper.

This was, I later learned, not an entirely unique phenomenon. The late Edward Lucas White claimed to have written sev-

eral books based entirely on night-fancies. H. P. Lovecraft had produced a number of his splendid tales inspired by a similar source. And of course, Coleridge had visioned his *Kubla Khan* in a dream. Psychology is full of instances attesting to the possibility of nocturnal inspiration.

But what made Gordon's confession so strange was the queer personal peculiarities attendant upon his own dream stages. He quite seriously claimed that he could close his eyes at any time, allow himself to relax into a somnolent doze, and proceed to dream endlessly. It did not matter whether this was done by day or by night; nor whether he slumbered for fifteen hours or fifteen minutes. He seemed particularly susceptible to subconscious impressions.

My slight researches into psychology led me to believe that this was a form of self-hypnosis, and that his short naps were really a certain stage of mesmeric sleep, in which the subject is open to any suggestion.

Spurred on by my interest, I used to question him closely as to the subject-matter of these dreams. At first he responded readily, once I had told him of my own ideas on the subject. He narrated several of them to me, which I took down in a notebook for future analysis.

Gordon's fantasies were far from the ordinary Freudian sublimation or repression types. There were no discernible hidden wish-patterns, or symbolic phases. They were somehow *alien*. He told me how he had dreamed the story of his famous *Gargoyle* tale; of the black cities he visited on the fabulous outer rims of space, and the queer denizens that spoke to him from formless thrones that existed beyond all matter. His vivid descriptions of terrifyingly strange geometry and ultra-terrestrial life-forms convinced me that his was no ordinary mind to harbor such eery and disturbing shadows.

The ease with which he remembered vivid details was also unusual. There seemed to be no blurred mental concepts at all; he recalled every detail of dreams he had experienced perhaps years ago. Once in a while he would gloss over portions of his descriptions with the excuse that "it would not be possible to make things intelligible in speech." He insisted that he had seen and comprehended much that was beyond description in a three-dimensional way, and that in sleep he could feel colors and hear sensations.

Naturally this was a fascinating field of research for me. In reply to my questions, Gordon once told me that he had always known these dreams from earliest remembered childhood to the present day, and that the only difference between the first ones and the last was an increase of *intensity*. He now claimed that he *felt* his impressions much more strongly.

The locale of the dreams was curiously fixed. Nearly all of them occurred amidst scenes which he somehow recognized were outside of our own cosmos. Mountains of black stalagmites; peaks and cones amidst crater valleys of dead suns; stone cities in the stars; these were commonplace. Sometimes he walked or flew, shambled, or moved in unnamable ways with the indescribable races of other planets. Monsters he could and would describe, but there were certain *intelligences* which existed only in a gaseous, nebulous state, and still others which were merely the embodiment of an inconceivable *force*.

GORDON was always conscious that he himself was present in every dream. Despite the awesome and often unnerving adventures he so glibly described, he claimed that none of these sleep-images could be classified as nightmares. He had

never felt afraid. Indeed, at times he experienced a curious reversal of identity, so that he regarded his dreams as natural and his waking life as unreal.

I questioned him as deeply as possible, and he had no explanation to offer. His family history had been normal in this and every other respect, although one of his ancestors had been a "wizard" in Wales. He himself was not a superstitious man, but he was forced to admit that certain of his dreams coincided curiously with descriptive passages in such books as the *Necronomicon,* the *Mysteries of the Worm,* and the *Book of Eibon.*

But he had experienced similar dreams long before his mind prompted him to read the obscure volumes mentioned above. He was confident that he had seen "Azozath" and "Yuggoth" prior to the time he knew of their half-mythic existence in the legendary lore of ancient days. He was able to describe "Nyarlathotep" and "Yog-Sothoth" from what he claimed to be actual dream contact with these allegorical entities.

I was profoundly impressed by these statements, and finally was forced to admit that I had no logical explanation to offer. He himself took the matter so seriously that I never tried to humor or ridicule him out of his notions.

Indeed, every time he wrote a new story I asked him quite seriously about the dream which had inspired it, and for several years he told me such things at our weekly meetings.

But it was about this time that he entered into that phase of writing which brought him into general disfavor. The magazines which catered to his work began to refuse some of the manuscripts as too horrible and revolting for popular taste. His first published book, *Night-Gaunt,* was a failure, due to the morbidity of its theme.

I sensed a subtle change in his style and subject. No longer did he adhere to conventional plot-motivation. He began to tell his stories in first-person, but the narrator was not a *human being.* His choice of words clearly indicated hyperesthesia.

In reply to my remonstrances on introducing non-human ideas, he argued that a real weird tale must be told from the viewpoint of the monster or entity itself. This was not a new theory to me, but I did object to the shockingly morbid note which his stories now emphasized. Then too, his non-human characters were not conventional ghouls, werewolves, or vampires. Instead he presented queer demons, star-spawned creatures, and even wrote a tale about a disembodied intelligence that he called *The Principle of Evil.*

This stuff was not only metaphysical and obscure, it was also insane, to any normal concept of thought. And the ideas and theories he expounded were becoming absolutely blasphemous. Consider his opening statement in *The Soul of Chaos:*

> This world is but a tiny island in the dark sea of Infinity, and there are horrors swirling all around us. Around us? Rather let us say *amongst* us. I know, for I have seen them in my dreams, and there are more things in this world than sanity can ever see.

The Soul of Chaos, by the way, was the first of his four privately printed books. By this time he had lost all contact with the regular publishers and magazines. He dropped most of his correspondents, too, and concentrated on a few eccentric thinkers in the Orient.

His attitude toward me was changing, too. No longer did he expound his dreams to me, or outline theories of plot and style. I didn't visit him very often any more, and he rejected my overtures with unmistakable bruskness.

I thought it just as well, in view of the last few sessions we had together. For

one thing, I didn't like some of the new books in his library. Occultism is all right for a study, but the nightmare arcana of *Cultes des Goules* and the *Dæmonolorum* are not conducive to a healthy state of mind. Then too, his last private manuscripts were almost too wild. I was not so favorably impressed at the earnestness with which he treated certain cryptic lore; some of his ideas were much too strong. In another century he would have been persecuted for sorcery if he dared express half the beliefs contained in these writings.

THERE were other factors which somehow made me half glad to avoid the man. Always a quiet recluse by choice, his hermit-like tendencies seemed visibly accentuated. He never went out any more, he told me; not even walking in the yard. Food and other necessities he had delivered weekly to the door. In the evening he allowed no light but a small lamp within the parlor study. All he volunteered about this rigid routine was noncommittal. He said that he spent all his time in sleeping and writing.

He was thinner, paler, and moved with a more mystic dreaminess of manner than ever before. I thought of drugs; he looked like a typical addict. But his eyes were not the feverish globes of fire which characterize the hashish-eater, and opium had not wasted his physique. Then I suspected insanity myself; his detached manner of speech, and his suspicious refusal to enter deeply into any subject of conversation, might be due to some nervous disorder. He was by nature susceptible to certain schizoid characteristics. Perhaps he was deranged.

Certainly what he said at the last about his recent dreams tended to substantiate my theory. I'll never forget that final discussion of dreams as long as I live—for reasons soon to be apparent.

He told me about his last stories with a certain reluctance. Yes, they were dream-inspired, like the rest. He had not written them for public consumption, and the editors and publishers could go to blazes for all he cared. He wrote them because he had been *told* to write them.

Yes, told to. By the creature in his dreams, of course. He did not care to speak about it, but since I was a friend . . .

I urged him. Now I wish I hadn't; perhaps I could have been spared the knowledge that follows. . . .

Edgar Henquist Gordon, sitting there in the wan lunar light of the moon; sitting at the wide window with eyes that equaled the leprous moonlight in the dreadful intensity of their pallid glow....

"I know about my dreams now. I was *chosen*, from the first, to be the Messiah; the messenger of His word. No, I'm not going religious. I'm not speaking of a God in the ordinary sense of the word men use to designate any power they cannot understand. I speak of the *Dark One*. You've read about Him in those books I showed you; the Demon Messenger, they call Him. But that's all allegorical. He isn't Evil, because there is no such thing as Evil. He is merely alien. And I am to be His messenger on earth.

"Don't fidget so! I'm not mad. You've heard about it all before—how the elder peoples worshipped forces that once were manifested physically on Earth, like the *Dark One* that has chosen me. The legends are silly, of course. He isn't a destroyer—merely a superior intelligence who wishes to gain mental rapport with human minds, so as to enable certain—ah—exchanges between humanity and Those beyond.

"He speaks to me in dreams. He told me to write my books, and distribute them to those who know. When the right time comes, we shall band together,

and unfold some of the secrets of the cosmos at which men have only guessed or even sensed in dreams.

"That's why I've always dreamed. I was chosen to learn. That is why my dreams have shown me such things—'Yuggoth' and all the rest. Now I am being prepared for my—ah—apostleship.

"I can't tell you much more. I must write and sleep a great deal nowadays, so that I can learn faster.

"Who is this *Dark One?* I can't tell you any more. I suppose you already think I'm crazy. Well, you have many supporters of that theory. But I'm not. It's true!

"You remember all I've told you about my dreams—how they kept growing in *intensity?* Well enough. Several months ago I had some different dream-sequences. I was in the dark—not the ordinary dark you know, but the absolute dark beyond Space. It isn't describable in three-dimensional concepts or thought-patterns at all. The darkness has a *sound,* and a *rhythm* akin to breathing, because it is alive. I was merely a bodiless mind there; when I saw Him.

"He came out of the dark and—ah—communicated with me. Not by words. I'm thankful that my previous dreams had been so arranged as to inure me against visual horror. Otherwise I should never have been able to stand the sight of Him. You see, He is not like humans, and the shape He chose to wear is pretty awful. But, once you understand, you can realize that the shape is just as allegorical as the legends ignorant men have fostered about Him and the others.

"He looks something like a medieval conception of the demon Asmodeus. Black all over, and furry, with a snout like a hog, green eyes, and the claws and fangs of a wild beast.

"I was not frightened after He communicated, though. You see, He wears that shape merely because foolish people in olden days believed that He looked that way. Mass belief has a curious influence on intangible forces, you understand. And men, thinking such forces evil, have made them assume the aspect of evilness. But He means no harm.

"I wish I could repeat some of the things He has told me.

"Yes, I've seen Him every night since then. But I promised to reveal nothing until the day is ready. Now that I understand, I am no longer interested in writing for the herd. I am afraid humanity doesn't mean anything to me since I have learned those steps which lie beyond—and how to achieve them.

"You can go away and laugh at me all you like. All I can say is that nothing in my books has been exaggerated in the least—and that they only contain infinitesimal glimpses of the ultimate revelations which lurk beyond human consciousness. But when the day He has appointed shall arrive, then the whole world will learn the truth.

"Until then, you'd best keep away from me. I can't be disturbed, and every evening the impressions get stronger and stronger. I sleep eighteen hours a day now, at times, because there is so much that He wishes to tell me; so much to be learned in preparation. But when the day comes I shall be the godhead—He has promised me that in some way *I shall become incarnate with Him!*"

SUCH was the substance of his monolog. I left shortly after that. There was nothing I could say or do. But later I thought a lot about what he had said.

He was quite gone, poor fellow, and it was evident that another month or so would bring him to the breaking-point. I felt sincerely sorry, and deeply concerned over the tragedy. After all, he had been my friend and mentor for many

years, and he was a genius. It was all too bad.

Still, he had a strange and disturbingly coherent story. It certainly conformed to his previous accounts of dream-life, and the legendary background was authentic, if the *Necronomicon* is to be believed. I wondered if his *Dark One* was remotely connected with the Nyarlathotep fable, or the "Dark Demon" of the witch-coven rituals.

But all that nonsense about the "day" and his being a "Messiah" on Earth was too absurd. What did he mean about the *Dark One's* promise of incarnating himself in Gordon? Demonic possession is an old belief credited only by the childishly superstitious.

Yes, I thought plenty about the whole thing. For several weeks I did a little investigating of my own. I reread the later books, corresponded with Gordon's former editors and publishers, dropped notes to his old friends. And I even studied some of the old magic tomes myself.

I got nothing tangible from all this, save a growing realization that something must be done to save Gordon from himself. I was terribly afraid for the man's mind, and I knew that I must act quickly.

So one night, about three weeks after our final meeting, I left the house and started to walk to his home. I intended to plead with him, if possible, to go away; or at least insist that he submit to a medical examination. Why I pocketed the revolver I cannot say—some inner instinct warned me that I might meet with a violent response.

At any rate I had the gun in my coat, and I gripped the butt firmly in one hand as I threaded some of the darker streets that led to his old dwelling on Cedar Street.

It was a moonless night, with ominous hints of a thunder-storm in the offing. The little wind that warns of approaching rain was already sighing in the dark trees overhead, and streaks of lightning occasionally flared in the west.

My mind was a chaotic jumble of apprehension, anxiety, determination, and a lurking bewilderment. I did not even formulate what I was going to do or say once I saw Gordon. I kept wondering what had happened to him in the last few weeks—whether the "day" he spoke of was approaching at last.

Tonight was May-Eve. . . .

THE house was dark. I rang and rang, but there was no response. The door opened under the impact of my shoulder. The noise of splintering wood was drowned out by the first peal of thunder overhead.

I walked down the hall to the study. Everything was dark. I opened the study door. There was a man sleeping on the couch by the window. It was undoubtedly Edgar Gordon.

What was he dreaming about? Had he met the *Dark One* again in his dreams? The *Dark One,* "looking like Asmodeus —black all over, and furry, with green eyes, hog-snout, and the claws and fangs of some wild beast;" the *Dark One* who told him about the "day" when Gordon should become incarnate with Him?

Was he dreaming about this, on May-Eve? Edgar Henquist Gordon, sleeping a strange sleep on the couch by the window. . . .

I reached for the light-switch, but a sudden flash of lightning forestalled me. It lasted only a second, but it was brilliant enough to illuminate the entire room. I saw the walls, the furniture, the terrible scribbled manuscripts on the table.

Then I fired three revolver shots before the final flicker died away. There was a single eldritch scream that was mercifully drowned in a new burst of thunder. I

screamed, myself. I never turned on the light, but only gathered up the papers on the table and ran out into the rain.

On the way home rain mingled with tear-drops on my face, and I echoed each new roar of thunder with a sob of deathly fear.

I could not endure the lightning, though, and shielded my eyes as I ran blindly to the safety of my own rooms. There I burnt the papers I had brought without reading them. I had no need of that, for there was nothing more to know.

That was weeks ago. When Gordon's house was entered at last, no body was found—only an empty suit of clothes that looked as though it had been tossed carelessly on the couch. Nothing else had been disturbed, but police point to the absence of Gordon's papers as an indication that he took them along when he disappeared.

I am very glad that nothing else has been found, and would be content to keep silent, were it not for the fact that Gordon is regarded as insane. I once thought him insane, too, so you see I must speak. After that I am going away from here, because I want to forget as much as I can. At that, I'm lucky I do not dream.

No, Edgar Gordon was not insane. He was a genius, and a fine man. But he told the truth in his books—about horrors being around us and *amongst* us. I dare not say all I now believe about his dreams, and whether or not his last stories were true. Perhaps it was just an optical illusion that I saw. I hope it was. But still, his clothes were there. . . .

Those last dreams—about the *Dark One,* who was waiting for the right day, and who would *incarnate* himself with Gordon. . . . I know what *incarnate* means now, and I shudder to think of what might have happened if I had not come upon the scene when I did. If there had been an awakening . . .

I thank God I was there in time, even though the memory is a haunting horror I cannot long endure. I am lucky to have had the revolver, too.

Because when that flash of lightning blazed across the room, I saw what lay in sleep upon the couch. That is what I shot; that is what sent me screaming into the storm, and that is what makes me sure that Gordon was not crazy, but spoke the truth.

For the incarnation had occurred. There on the couch, dressed in the clothes of Edgar Henquist Gordon, lay a demon like Asmodeus—a black, furry creature with the snout of a hog, green eyes, and the dreadful fangs and talons of some wild beast. It was the *Dark One* of Edgar Gordon's dreams!

"There were heavy old neck-chains and lockets of twenty-four carat gold."

Midas

By BASSETT MORGAN

A shuddery graveyard tale, through which blows an icy breath of horror, like a chill wind from the tomb

THE gloom deepened under the arching trees of the town's east end, where the darkies' shacks had stood, some of them since Civil War days. Orinsley was glad to get through it and emerge near the railroad tracks. It was all familiar since boyhood. He wanted to get away then, never dreaming he would be forced back, hoofing it instead of driving a car, on a lousy little domestic errand his mother had invented as something for him to do.

The darkies knew him and grinned as they spoke, though they couldn't have liked the way he snarled or ignored their greetings. The whole damned town probably knew he'd been hauled out of a mess at college that cost his father plenty, and told he could settle down in his father's dinky, dusty little office with its stuffed owl over the book-case, its ancient medical books and poorly paid general practise.

Away from the trees the sun was hot, the tracks gleamed in the distance. The sprouting horse-tail ferns rasped his silk socks. Bullfrogs plunked in the green-slimed railroad ditch and he shied stones at them viciously.

The lonely whistle of the afternoon local train shrieked and he hustled to reach the flat-topped log bridging the ditch and leading to the cabin of Midas. The train rushed by as he balanced on the log, enveloping him in sooty black smoke curling low, a sign of moisture-laden air that meant rain.

Then over the padlocked gate he saw Julia on the cabin steps. She came slowly toward him, luscious-looking as ever, her tropic blood early ripened, her eyes questing, just as alluring as he had found her before he left for college. Dark hair with the sheen of a crow's wing framed her face. Her skin was flushed ivory. And he saw, as she unlocked the gate, the little opal-tinted moons at the base of her finger-nails.

Inside the gate, he heard, like an echo of boyhood, little hammers beating inside the front window of the cabin, and he saw the gleam of golden things, the spread of gold beaten thin under the hammers, the luster of ornaments new-gilded and drying on shelves. On the hot air oozed the smell of banana-oil mixed with gold-paint. He found Julia's hands between his fingers that stole to her wrists and felt the small hammers of her blood beating faster at his touch. Little gold hoops at her ears danced in the sunlight. Julia was quivering, though she said little except: "I heard you were back. I knew you would come."

It didn't seem such a lousy errand then. Without the small oval frames, heirlooms his mother prized, he wouldn't dare walk into the domain of Midas in midafternoon, even if he had been fool enough to climb over a gate set in a wall of old rail ties sunk on end, their tops sharpened. Midas had treasure to guard; his gold, and what was dearer to him, his daughter.

The town, snootily, helped Midas keep Julia safe. Once Orinsley had advised her to get out. Now he was glad she was there, lithe-moving as a cat, her voice a throaty purr, walking with him to the cabin as Midas lifted his head and stared with black eyes close to his hawk's beak of a nose. The silver in his hair set off the sinister features. No smile quirked his thin lips as Orinsley laid the frames on his work-bench.

"No hurry about them," he said. "I'll drop around sometime and see if they're ready."

The paint-smell caught his breath a little. It was more wholesome on the porch with weed-tang and marigolds bordering the walk in the sun, and Julia's hands locked demurely around her knees as they talked.

He wanted to ask her about her origin, and things the town had wondered about when Midas came there long ago in the night, like a hunted man; began building his cabin of old timbers and started knocking at house doors asking for ornaments to be gilded. But even college hadn't given him quite nerve enough to get personal with Midas sitting watching, beating gold so thin it fluttered as he warmed a camel's-hair brush on his arm and lifted the tissue between pages of

little blank gold-books for use by sign-painters.

After an hour he went away with Julia laughing softly from the gate as she made a date for that night with him. But when he got home young Dorothy Correll had come for dinner, the last unmarried daughter of wealthy Dickson Correll, sweet as a rose and not without thorns of wit that set his father beaming and his mother laughing. She whispered to him after dinner that Dickson Correll gave each of his daughters ten thousand dollars when they married, and Dorothy was the last one unclaimed.

"If you youngsters would like a ride, take the car," said his father. "Unless there's an accident, I'll not be using it tonight."

"That old wreck!" Orinsley snorted scornfully.

"It's all right, Jack," said Dorothy insistently.

Afterward he understood. She wanted to dance at Paine Court, down the river, a place strictly forbidden to Correll's daughter. She got wild at this convention-ridden little dump of a town where everyone knew you and saw everything you did. She was trying to appear sophisticated and wise, which amused him because when he kissed her she quivered and her pretty hands clung; she went all tender and intense and quoted verse. She was quaint enough to be utterly charming, and danced like a dryad at Paine Court after a mild gin drink or two. There were a number of other youngsters dancing and drinking and acting hard-boiled ineffectively, and he started home with Dorothy for more shy kisses on the way.

Then something happened to the car. He was trying to fix it and tempering his curses for her ears when some of the crowd came along and offered to take Dorothy, as it was late and she was getting jittery. Orinsley told her to go.

It was much later when he got the car rattling over the rutted mud road and the headlights shone on a man walking on the side who darted into the ditch slope as if avoiding being seen. But Orinsley had recognized the tall, lean form of Midas, carrying a sack.

"Jump in and I'll give you a lift, Midas," he said. "You're quite a way from home and it's after midnight."

"Pete Latour in the Frenchy Village wanted some work done and I went to see about it. We sat late, drinking. . . ."

But in the dashboard lights, the boots of Midas looked muddy and grass-streaked. There was a smell of mold more ancient than fresh-trampled mud or even fresh-turned earth, a smell that sets the dogs howling when somebody is dying after a siege of sickness.

"I wouldn't think it paid you to go so far for work," said Orinsley. "Those gilding jobs don't pay much, though I imagine your gold-beating is a good graft."

The loose connection he had fixed in the car balked again just in sight of the cabin. Cursing, Orinsley got out, and so did Midas.

"I've got some wine if you'll come in," he said. "I make it myself, and it's mellowed a long time."

"Thanks. You know a lot of trades, don't you? Where did you learn gold-beating, Midas?" Orinsley asked as they walked to the cabin.

"Long ago, in the Bahamas, where I was born." Midas went on telling of the green islands of the Spanish Main. "There was always a bit of pirate loot turning up, and we beat it down to sell better." He told of old stone strongholds on the islands, streets that were flights of steps, poinciana seeds popping in the heat. Orinsley listened earnestly.

It was the first time he had entered the living-room of the cabin, where Midas lighted an oil lamp that struck flares from the gilded nymphs and urns, spindly chairs and trinkets waiting to be called for. Julia came from dreams wearing a silk negligee over pajamas and little mules with feather ruffs, the hoops at her ears flashing. She brought long-footed wine-glasses on a tray inlaid with gold. Golden bangles at her wrists tinkled through their talk. In the corner Midas sat watching as Orinsley emptied glass after glass and grew bolder with Julia until she perched on the arm of his chair and what he said was for her alone.

"Well, the wine is all gone and I might as well be," he said finally.

"There's a big hogshead of it down cellar," said Midas. "Show him, Julia."

"Ever sell it?" asked Orinsley.

"Only to one person, Dickson Correll, the only man in town that appreciates real 'Jerez' that you call sherry. He knows wines and doesn't kick at my price."

"Doesn't need to. The depression didn't affect him, they say. Corrells are riding high," Orinsley said as he started after Julia down a dark stair until below she lighted a candle. Cobwebs festooned the rafters and corners. Many barrels stood on cross-legged "horses." One huge, copper-strapped "pipe" had a stone jug under the spigot.

"Hold your glass," said Julia.

The long foot was still clasped in his fingers, a gorgeous goblet covered with golden filigree in delicate designs. In the cellar gloom Orinsley sat drinking, with Julia in one arm, caught by her lure, tossing reason through the small hoops at her ears, careless of the tread of Midas going to and fro overhead. Through their kisses the little hammers began beating. Midas was at his work-bench, late as it was, pounding gold, somehow setting Orinsley's blood to a quicker tempo.

"Nobody would ever guess the treasure this cabin holds," he said to Julia. "You, and your father's gold. . . ."

"I won't have to worry," she said breathlessly and waited, her eyes questing, the perfumed temptation of her soft body in his arms.

"Where does he get the gold now, Julia?"

"Ask him," she crooned. "And the trade will die with him because he thinks it isn't a trade for me to follow, though I can beat the gold and I've learned to work it. That tray and the glasses are my work."

"Julia!" He stood up, his head swimming. "I'd better travel. Tomorrow night, maybe."

"But earlier," she whispered, "before he comes home!"

She had pestered him about that broken date and his breezing in with Midas, as most girls would have done. He spoke to Midas before he left, praising Julia's gold-work.

"She's wonderful, Midas. The trade needn't die with you because you haven't a son. Lord, you'll have a son-in-law one of these days. . . ."

Midas glared at him with fever-bright eyes. The thin lips twitched under the hawk's-beak nose.

"He would have to be a man with guts, somebody to look after Julia and the gold . . . and all else . . . getting it," he hissed, rising in a crouch as if stiffened with age and labor, coming toward Orinsley, whose arm still held Julia in her silk gorgeousness and little bare ankles, her scented dark hair flying. Orinsley was very drunk, but he caught through the perfume that sinister smell of death carried by Midas.

"You said it was pirate loot, but there are no pirates now," he said. "I'd like to get in on your graft, Midas. I'd make

this town sit up and take notice . . . wouldn't we, Julia?"

"You mean it?" croaked Midas, gesturing toward Julia with a hand that shook.

"Sure I mean it! You don't think I enjoy that rattling old bus my father lets me drive when he isn't using it. I wanted to hang out my own shingle as a doctor. But it takes money to set up anywhere, and I had an accident that took money to settle. That's why I'm here, in my dad's office, though no one is going to risk a young doctor after dad's experience. So here I am, eh, Julia . . . darling . . . sweetest." And he was drunk enough to take her in his arms and kiss her passionately while Midas looked on, his lips and jaw-muscles working now under the dark skin, his nostrils twitching, hell in his eyes.

"I'll be back here, Midas. Not for your damned gold secrets, but your living treasure. . . ."

He didn't remember what else he vowed before staggering to the car at break of day. But, befuddled with the golden wine, he stalled the car on the tracks as the morning train was roaring down. He had time only to roll out and down the ditch when it was heaved thirty feet into twisted junk.

The shock of ditch-water sobered Orinsley to face the worst day he remembered in years, his father's anger at the loss of a car still useful to him, his mother's grief at the family row from which she tried to shield him. Through it the night with Midas seemed like a riotous dream, fabulous golden vintage in a cobwebby cellar, gold-stemmed goblets, the lush beauty and temptation of Julia, the lumps of gold Midas was beating.

That day Dorothy ran in to say they were leaving for their summer cottage at the lake and said good-bye to him in the shelter of lilac trees heavy with fragrant bloom. Sun spattered her light dress with shifting brightness and shadow. She was blond as ripe wheat and twittering youngly as a canary, but went quiet at his kisses that started her cheeks glowing and deepened the blue of her eyes. Perhaps, if she hadn't gone away . . .

But home was desperately uncomfortable at meal-times, and his mother innocently asked when the frames would be gilded.

"I'll go and see," he said, with martyr meekness.

Midas was away, but Julia had the gate unlocked. Her taffeta dress whispered as he crushed her in his arms, and he stayed until Midas came through the starlight carrying the sack and the death-smell. He went to wash his hands while Julia poured wine, and Orinsley seized the chance to feel the sack. His fingers were still gripping it when Midas returned without his shoes and caught him with the sack in his hands.

Orinsley's jaw was belligerent. Midas was in his power.

"I said it was a good graft," he remarked. "How about a partner, Midas?"

Through the sacking he had felt bones, jaw-bones with teeth. He knew one source of Midas' gold: he was a ghoul, hoarding the gold from graveyards.

And Midas began nodding his head and muttering. "The Frenchies like gold teeth, and bury rings and trinkets with their dead. It's just a waste of gold."

"Yes, and there are the old graves around the church and in the new cemetery, Midas. Lots of stuff there."

"But you can't dig a grave in town," croaked Midas, poking his head on its long neck nearer Orinsley. "They'd see."

"Around the church the stones are sagging untidily. It's time they were straightened and the graves leveled. Civic pride

shall inspire me to agitate the town about it. And when the workers get digging . . . eh, Midas?"

The old man was polishing one hand over the other and chuckling wickedly. His eyes flickered and rolled, showing their whites in gleams. Orinsley needed the wine he'd imbibed to endure that scene.

"And the big stone Correll vault, Midas. They moved the ancestors to it, and Grandmother Correll had dental plates of gold, which was town gossip."

"And why should I share my graft with you?" asked Midas with oily cunning, though his voice grated through his yellow teeth.

"Because I know about it, for one thing. Because while you haven't got a son to carry on your trade, you'll be having a son-in-law to take care of everything and Julia. How about the Correll vault tonight, Midas? The lock could be picked. . . . But don't tell Julia I'm in this."

"No," the voice of Midas creaked through thin lips. "It kind of spoils young love. It did that to me. Her mother found out and——" But Julia returned.

Only when Orinsley was going home did Midas appear out of the shadows carrying a limp sack and a handful of tools. A hedge of clipped conifers bordered the cemetery roads, casting pointed shadows over the tomb-stones. A thick evergreen hedge grew tall around the Correll vault. Orinsley sweated at the creak of tools on the lock of the iron-grille door. A tube-rose wreath lately placed gave off a sickly sweetness as with a cold-chisel wrapped in rag they broke cement around the inscribed slabs and finally slid a coffin from its shelf. The old screws squealed as Midas twisted them. But once the lid was up, Orinsley did not mind so much. No worse than pickled cadavers of the dissecting-room, anyway.

But coming away, the death stench on his hands sickened him until, imitating Midas, he cleaned them somewhat in grass and earth, and washed them at the house before swigging more golden wine and assisting Midas to sort their loot, gold dental plates, rings and heavy old cravat pins.

ORINSLEY went home in high excitement, schemes flooding his brain. He began at breakfast to mention the disgraceful state of the old churchyard and wrote about it to the town paper. His mother encouraged this sudden flare of civic pride, though his father merely snorted. He was still angry at having to spend money for a new automobile.

Only in a little home town could he have stirred so quickly the fuss over the grave-stones, but it elevated him a good deal in town opinions when he went around saying what a pretty place it was, and historic enough to have its history written. The obvious response came. He was urged to write about it.

"I'll do it!" he agreed, and talked about advance money from publishers to account for his own sudden financial acquisitions. Even his father swallowed that story when Orinsley paid a first installment on a new roadster and went to the lake to show it to Dorothy Correll.

The big Correll summer-house was filled with the nicest town youngsters. Over a week-end Orinsley danced and swam, played tennis and made love to Dorothy. After the passion-purple of his affair with Julia in the cabin, Dorothy was like white roses, cool, delicate, fresh and charming. He even hated coming to her with the death taint on his hands. Even without her father's ten-thousand-dollar gift to each daughter at her wedding, he wanted Dorothy for ever and

ever. He was reckless enough to ask if she couldn't stay in town that summer, for his sake.

"I'm lost without you," he told her. "I wish we needn't be parted even for a day, darling. Dorothy, couldn't it happen like that some day? Couldn't it?"

"Honey," she whispered, "leave me a little . . . breath . . . between kisses. . . ."

Through the week the patients calling at his father's office saw Orinsley writing industriously and they told him stories of earlier days. The town clerk searched old records for him, as did the editor of the town paper. In the old files funerals were chronicled with the same elaboration as weddings and gave him many a "lead." By night he went with Midas far afield, and they returned with loot to Julia and the golden wine in goblets that would have pleased a Borgia. Of course Julia knew. . . .

But she had a rare gift of wisdom and silence. She knew how deeply he was entangled in her love and her life. There were times when Orinsley viewed with amazement the adventures he encountered in that quiet little dump of a town, loot and love, beauty and beastliness, the softly enveloping flame of Julia's thrall poisoning his brain as the wine fumes fired his blood, the cruel eyes of Midas watching them with menace and amusement in their glittering black orbs.

He was so deeply in the parlous partnership that Julia made no demands, did not fuss because he never appeared during the week-ends. That interlude was for Dorothy Correll, young and lovely as a rose with dew in its heart, trusting him with her lips and her life, ready to give him her hand and her fortune.

He was responsible for the renovation of the churchyard, yet dreaded its beginning. And when he evinced faint-heartedness about a night foray with the greater risk of being discovered, Midas showed his teeth, though he waited until a storm crashed its bolts of thunder and lightning. A horrible job it was shoveling mud and water, ducking down when lightning flared, pawing among the rotted rags and bones. The old newspaper records had not exaggerated. There were heavy old neck-chains and lockets of twenty-four-carat gold set with diamonds and pearls, diamond rings and ear-drops, bracelets and wedding-rings, a rich haul.

That week-end he took gifts to Dorothy, an expensive little purse with powder compact and cigaret case, along with candy and flowers. And he borrowed one of her rings to have her size for an engagement solitaire. She lent him a quaint little gold ring with a lover's-knot that belonged to her grandmother. Into the mind of Orinsley flashed the night in the vault when he gouged with a tool the dental plates from that estimable and once pretty old lady. It wasn't so easy to hear Dorothy's raptures about her ring with the ghosts of his crimes gibbering mutely between them.

The Corrells accepted him with old-fashioned graciousness, and invited his father and mother for a week-end to the lake cottage, where innocently they crashed over Orinsley the penalty menacing him only vaguely until that hour.

"We have wanted a trip to Europe for a long time," said Mrs. Correll. "Dorothy doesn't want to go. She wants her wedding this fall, and I've suggested she and Frank stay in our house this winter while we are away. Perhaps when we return, his book will be published. We're going to be very proud of that."

Orinsley's hands were as cold as his face was hot. But a man had to act impatient to have his own marriage hurried along. He had to appear eager to have the world know he had won Dorothy. Across the table from him Dorothy's blue

eyes had little flames of joy in their depths. Her red mouth pouted kissingly for his eyes to see. But under the tablecloth his hands were scrubbing each other of the horror they had dabbled in; he could have emulated Lady Macbeth's cry of despair, as Mrs. Correll spoke of having an announcement in the town paper.

Knowing a crash was coming, he endured through that week-end. Coming home, his father, the old doctor, tried to make up for his anger over the son's escapades and the wrecked car.

"You're making me proud of you, son, though not just the way I planned. I just hadn't patience at first. . . . But it's a good old name. Orinsley . . . never been smirched . . . never a breath of scandal. I haven't wealth, but a good name . . . better than riches. . . ."

Orinsley was sweating nervously then, and later that day, when the news kid left the daily paper in the office; and opening it he saw the splurge made of the wedding announcement. He sat staring until his father bustled in shaking rain-drops from his hat and wrung his son's hands in felicitations. Only then did young Orinsley realize that the afternoon sky was black and the first big drops of storm spattered down. A greater gloom was in his brain, an ordeal to face that he dreaded unspeakably.

"You're not going out tonight?" his mother said.

"Now, Emily, I know how he feels, just too happy to stay inside walls. Youth, romance . . . nothing like it."

Nothing like the predicament he was in as he drove to the cabin through cannonading of thunder and flashes of lightning that made steel javelins of the pouring rain. The gate was unlocked, showing they expected him. On the workbench was an opened newspaper. In the living-room Midas paced the floor, and in his eyes were lightnings. Julia was on the couch, her eyelids puffed from weeping, her mouth sullen, her beauty sultry.

ORINSLEY'S scalp prickled as the tongue-lashing of Midas began and he heard the thing he was, not only a ghoul, but a liar, a cheat, a felon.

Orinsley sulked and raged. He began cursing Midas and grew defiant.

"Try smirching my name! You'll land yourself and Julia behind bars. I've been engaged to Dorothy Correll for months. I'm going to marry her. Keep your tongue quiet and we'll go on with this unholy partnership and get rich. Talk, and you're through. Not only through, but in prison. You've always been a mystery around here. My name is solid. Nobody'll believe your rantings about me."

"Marry Dorothy Correll!" cried Julia. "It's me you love. All these years. Before you went away. You said——" and she hurled at him the promises he had made, endearments, love phrases that betrayed to Midas how deep was his affair with her. And Midas adored her. Midas stood silent, like an accusing god carved of bronze with only his eyes alive and shining insanely.

Midas turned, his feet moving heavily, as if his reason fought an overpowering impulse. Then, suddenly, his hand shot to the wall and plucked down a long-bladed dagger with gold-encrusted hilt knobbed with gems, a gorgeous weapon. He whirled as Orinsley shrank away and threw up his elbows to guard himself, backing toward the door, paralyzed with fear like a man in a nightmare trying to run on wooden legs. Midas came warily, on his toes, moving like a panther gathering itself to spring.

There was a screech as he leaped. Julia was between them as the long blade flashed.

For a moment she clung to Orinsley's

neck. Then her hands let go. She crumpled slowly, smiling at Orinsley as he and Midas stood stupidly watching the color drain from her face and the life fade from her eyes, and a dark stream creep beneath her body along the floor.

Crashing through the horror that hypnotized Orinsley came like chords of music the memories of his hours with Julia. He couldn't help pitying, or kneeling to touch her wrists and throat and listen for her heart to know if she was beyond help. And while he knelt the hands of Midas darted to his throat. The claws of his fingers sank deep, garroting Orinsley. Nor could Orinsley fight off their peril, though he struggled.

The dagger was still there, but Midas didn't use it. When Orinsley's senses returned, he was bound from shoulders to ankles, sitting with his back against the work-shop wall. And on the work-bench Midas slaved at his greatest masterpiece.

The storm still raged. Lightning blazed at the window. Thunder crackled and rumbled. Outside there was the clean fume of rain, the wholesome breath of bursting sod and beaten foliage. But in that den was the fruity ether of Lethe, the overpowering fumes of lacquer that Midas brushed over his transcendent task, and whisking the camel's-hair brush along a brown arm knotted with veins, he lifted gold tissue and placed it meticulously and patted it with loving care on the body of Julia.

Orinsley had to watch, with his heart pounding so that it strained his bonds and at his lips his breath panted, as Midas made a golden image of his daughter. The lightning poured furious illumination over her pretty feet and legs, the little mounds of her breasts on which her slender hands were folded. Her face was a gleaming mask. Midas dipped her dark hair in gold paint, and wrung it out and coiled it skilfully to dry and set, and with a brush he gilded her eyelashes.

Inside Orinsley the joy of living, the soul-fire, died out never to rekindle during that terrible vigil until, exhausted, Midas laid his arms on the work-bench and his head on his wrists and slept.

Orinsley began wriggling his body to where the dagger lay. He got it between his feet and sawed his wrist bonds apart. In five more minutes he was free and catfooting to the door, to the storm that was heavenly wet on his face, and the winds of God that lashed a man back to sanity after madness in hell.

Instead of going home he went to the office, poured disinfectants over his hands, rubbed the thong-marks from his arms and legs and was sitting at the desk with paper and pencils when his father came in, startled at his son's inspired industry that kept him writing all night.

Orinsley crumpled the scribbled page on which automatically he had written "Insane . . . mad . . . crazy . . . golden image of her . . . nobody would listen to his ravings now . . . even rifled graves . . . I'm safe. . . ."

He burned the page but could not endure himself that day; so he drove to the lake to see Dorothy and in the company of that wholesomely happy, healthy child, try to forget horror.

Yet in the evenings, in the stillness of night, small fiends came mocking him. The gold in the cabin might as well be his. He had raised ghosts to get it. Skulls and skeletons alight with phosphorescent decay haunted his dreams. And there was the hour ahead when the golden image would be discovered!

When he returned home, his mother asked about the little oval frames, and he had to say he'd call for them.

THE uncertain autumnal rains left the night dark and starless. No light marked out the cabin, but he carried a flash and a gun. Through the window he saw that the work-bench was empty, tidily cleared. Nor did Midas appear. Room by room he searched, first for Midas and the image, then for gold. Greedily he pawed over Julia's silken fripperies, the clothes of Midas, the shelves of gilded trash where his mother's frames shone, and then went to the cellar, where he and Julia had laughed and kissed under the cobwebs. But he found no gold. Midas and the golden image had disappeared.

Leaving the cabin, Orinsley breathed more freely. Midas was gone. He could marry Dorothy Correll without fear of the insane croakings of the mysterious old ghoul. But he reported his failure to find Midas.

"I remember when he came here," said Mr. Correll; "a strange man. I was interested in him from the first. People looked askance at him, and I think he appreciated my friendliness. I hadn't intended to mention it, but I can throw a little light on his disappearance. I had a note from Midas, left under my office door, which said he was going where he came from with his daughter, and begging me to accept a slight token of our friendship. I'll reveal it in good time, so don't tease about it now, Dotty."

"Ah, secrets!" cried Dorothy. "A wedding present!"

Autumnal colors blazoned the little church where Dorothy came to her bridal in misty lace and left it in rice showers that began again at the steps of her own home where the wedding breakfast was held. The guests were kissing her and shaking Orinsley's hand when the old darky butler came with a tray of golden inlay and goblets with golden filigree filled with wine of unmistakable bouquet. Orinsley stared at the goblets, feeling blood that sang in his veins begin to chill until he could count the slow beat.

"Where . . . where did you get these?" he gasped.

"From Midas," answered Mr. Correll proudly. "I told you he made me a gift. Come down-cellar and see . . . you have all the years ahead with Dorothy. Three minutes now——" but Orinsley didn't catch the old man's chatter. He followed to gaze at the great "pipe" on its cross-legged horse, and under its spigot the jug he remembered. With his knees wobbling, Orinsley turned the spigot and filled the jug. He needed stimulant.

Mr. Correll went fussily away and left him draining the jug. Putting it down, he let it fill again to drown the sharp jab of memory, the gleam of a golden image in his brain. And when he had emptied a second Brobdingnagian draft he wiped his lips with his hand and found something clinging: a wiry golden hair!

His legs buckled under him. He was sick, reeling. Even the thud of his head on the cellar floor didn't matter. His body twitched unmercifully when they found him on the floor and his father bent close to hear him muttering: "Strychnin . . . I think . . . in the wine . . . look in the cask."

Foam spouted and rimmed his lips. A greater convulsion silenced coherent utterance. Vaguely through the gathering mists he knew they were opening the cask-head, dragging rakes through the wine, screeching at horror quickly silent. He knew the gleam of the golden image, the gloom of another form, and heard the clink of golden lumps dropped on the stone floor, the loot of ghouls, himself and Midas.

Dorothy, widowed before she was a wife, would never know. She would cherish his memory tenderly. They wouldn't let her know about Julia the golden in the cask, and the strychnin-

soaked carcass of Midas who crawled into the cask to die knowing Ormsley would swig the golden wine as greedily as he always did. . . .

His father's voice, anguished and far away, was receding still farther.

"No hope . . . he's dying . . . he's dead!"

The Black Gang

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

Squarehead and scowling hunky,
  Polacker, limey, wop,
Deep in the tramper's belly,
  Making the gages hop,
Shut from the salt spray's stinging,
  Hid from the sun and stars,
Swaying and fiercely cursing,
  Working the rakes and bars,
Feeding the furnace fires,
  Deaf to the shovels' clang,
Keeping the pistons pounding,
  While the hot fire-doors bang,
Sweating and black with coal dust,
  Burned to a sizzling brown,
Dreaming of wild hell-raising,
  When they were loose in town.

Yankee and cock-eyed lascar,
  Heiny and Frog and Chink,
Down in the tramper's stokehold,
  Smelling the bilge's stink,
Hid from the gray gull's screaming,
  Shut from the wind-swept skies,
Keeping the red flames roaring,
  Blinking their sweat-filled eyes,
Slaves to the throbbing engines,
  Stripped to their blistered hides,
Struggling for breath and footing,
  Flouting the rolling tides,
Splashed with the steam's white gasping,
  Devils and gods and men,
Dreaming of wild hell-raising,
  When they reach port again.

Mice

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

What ghastly fate pursued the dweller in that vermin-infested old mansion in Louisiana? The story of a weird doom

THE gun glints on my table as I pen these lines. It will not lie there long. It is my passport from the Horror that is gathering for me now to a sanctuary that nothing earthly can ever profane.

That seething rustle in the walls about me now—too well I know that sound! And here in this modern apartment, amid a city's bustling, an ancient curse comes upon me, even as I saw it come upon another man in that ancient, rotting plantation-house by the river. But it shall never reach me! I have courage, as poor Arthur Marsden had not. I do not fear the death that slithers and gnaws in mad darkness; for I have here a death that is quick and clean. And I shall use it. . . .

Listen, while there is yet time, to the tale of what happened to Arthur Marsden.

Why is it, I wonder, that the word "schoolmate" always conjures up such images of intimacy and friendship? Certainly not all of my schoolmates were also my friends! I have shared classrooms with literally thousands of young men and women whose faces were always strange to me, whose very names I never knew.

And yet I have more than a casual recollection of Arthur Marsden as we sat together through the tedium of lectures, or met on the graveled paths and oak-shrouded campus of New Orleans' most famous university.

Just why this memory remains so vivid, I cannot say. Certainly it was not because I liked the man. Few of the students did, as I recall. Poor Marsden walked alone, a vague and shrinking recluse. He had no intimates. He sought none. I have never seen a man who lived more utterly in books and studies, to whom undergraduates and undergraduate activity were more completely alien. Every college has its "grinds," but Arthur Marsden's absorption in study exceeded anything I ever knew. It seemed almost a deliberate self-withdrawal, the forced concentration of one who does not dare let himself think. He seemed to fear, more than dislike, any contact with his fellows at all. He might well have been isolated by some strange secret he dared not share, or by some strange malady that set him apart from everyone he knew.

I recall, indeed, that strange rumors seemed to follow him. There were whisperings in dark corners, and all manner of fantastic and horrible things were hinted at. Most of this can be set down to mere legendry and nonsense, such as always plagues any breaker of Youth's rigid taboos. The involuntary hostility of the adolescent toward anything strange is almost unbelievable. He tends to type with his fellows like so many peas in a pod, and anyone who dares to differ from him is cruelly detested.

And yet I seemed to sense an undercurrent in these rumors about young Arthur Marsden that defied dismissal as

mere malicious gossip. There *was* something definitely odd about him. His furtiveness, his silence, his fear of darkness and of shadows (I do not recall ever seeing him abroad after dusk!)—these things could not be lightly overlooked. Nor could the shadow of fear that was always on his face. It was a strange brooding terror, without rime or reason. A sort of expectant dread. . . .

And then, of course, there was the episode of the mouse.

THE thing sounds almost silly, in retrospect. The mouse was just a mouse, one of those little, wriggling, pinkish-white rodents you see in pet-shop windows. One of our freshmen brought it to his gymnasium class in a pocket and it escaped to run squeaking about the locker-room, to the great amusement of those of us who dressed or undressed on the rude benches that lined the grimy walls. A friendly little mouse it was, and most inquisitive. It slithered gayly over our bare arms and shoulders and let

"I fled crazily before that slithering horde of ravening atomies."

us feed it crumbs; gnawing daintily at them while sitting erect, like a little white squirrel. We were all so engrossed with it that none of us saw Arthur Marsden as he wandered in and sat down before his locker.

What happened then no one seemed to know exactly; yet I dare say none of us ever forgot the utter strangeness of it. The shrieks still ring in my ears as I write. And when I close my eyes I seem to see poor Marsden as he sprawled on the cracked concrete floor, his limbs jerking and twitching in the agonies of his strange seizure. And I see the drawn, wild faces of his comrades ringed about him; my own face was doubtless as distorted and blank as the rest. It was only when a gymnasium coach came rushing into the room to see what had happened there, that the tension broke and let us lift the poor fellow to try to find what could be ailing him. And it was all over by then. He was still, and you might have thought him asleep were it not for the trickle of blood from bitten lips that smeared his face. . . .

We carried him, some six of us, into the rubbing-room and laid him on a table. The owner of the mouse was one of the six. He had captured his pet from where it was crouching on the fallen man's body, and slid it into a pocket. Later he told me his intention of chloroforming the little being.

"Can't take any chances," he muttered. "It must have hydrophobia! Did you see the way it rushed at Marsden as he fell, and tore at his throat? Rended and tore like a little fury! Of course its teeth aren't large enough to do much harm. But——"

I didn't answer him. I was too disturbed to speak, for I too had seen that inexplicable thing. And somehow the sight of that little pallid anomaly, squeaking and rending at an unconscious man's body, had been unbelievably revolting and horrible to me. For I realized—indeed, I think that all of us realized—that Arthur Marsden had known the mouse would attack him. How else account for that delirium of terror, that utter collapse? It was no physical malady that had struck him down, as the college doctor found out immediately on examining him. It was the result of some shock that had almost stopped his heart from beating!

I left the gymnasium that day with my brain in a whirl. I was groping along nauseous and blasphemous paths of speculation I dared not put into words; for there in that familiar place had leered suddenly, dreadfully, the Unfamiliar. Men do not fear mice. Nor do mice attack men. And yet I had seen both these natural laws bewilderingly set aside. . . .

The whole thing left me deeply affected for days afterward. I had a weird feeling of instability, of distorted perspective. The harmlessness of harmless things seemed no longer quite so obvious as it had once seemed. It was long before I learned to know again that birds and insects and the very grass and trees were really not inimical. After what I had seen, I should not have been surprized at anything. I dare say that for a while I too, like Arthur Marsden, shrank from shadows. I am sure that I wore an expression of fear, like his, upon my face. . . .

As for Marsden himself, the fellow lay for hours on that gymnasium table, more dead than alive. It was almost dusk before the coaches would allow him to walk the short distance to his dormitory. But no amount of questioning on their part could elicit an explanation from the pale, trembling youth. At last they had to let him go.

I EXPECTED, of course, to question him myself about the episode, but I never got the chance; for less than a week later Arthur Marsden vanished from the university. He never returned.

The reason for this abrupt departure I learned later. New Orleans newspapers carried an item on the death of one Doctor John Marsden, M. D., Ph.D., at his ancestral home in upper Louisiana. The doctor had succumbed quite suddenly, I gathered, to a malady which had slain many of his line, through several generations. His body was interred on the day following his death, and his family (consisting of a wife, a maiden sister of his own age and one son, Arthur) left immediately for an extended European voyage. "During their absence," one account concluded, "the ancient Marsden home will be renovated in its entirety."

I was somewhat bewildered by these items. They seemed to hint at something far stranger than they told. Why, I wondered, did none of them name this hereditary malady which had stricken so many Marsdens? Why was the doctor's body interred with such bizarre haste? Why the hurried exodus of his family? And above all, since when does the renovation of a man's house find place in his obituary?

I got no answer to these questions from subsequent editions, and as time went on I lost interest in them. After all, Arthur Marsden and all that pertained to him had gone out of my life. I never expected that I would see him again.

Would to God that I never had!

* * * * * * * *

I AM no trained writer. Perhaps there are other ways of denoting lapse of time besides this row of asterisks. But I must somehow bridge a gap of ten years, a gap which has no bearing on this tale at all; for when next I encountered the name Marsden my school days were long since forgotten. It was, indeed, but a few short months ago.

The name was crudely painted on a board, and that board was dangling from a small unpainted station-house at the junction where I had alighted from a north-bound express to await the local train to New Orleans. Nor did I at first connect the "Marsdenville" that was a mangy cluttering of old houses and negro-shanties along a single street—I say I failed to connect this sorry hamlet with anything familiar. But suddenly it came to me that these plantation-towns along our Mississippi usually bear the names of former masters. Nor is the name of Marsden one which is frequently met with in the Deep South.

Curious, I tried to question the ancient and bearded "cajun" who tended the station-house. I could get nothing out of him, of course. But while we were talking I felt a touch at my elbow and heard a man's voice say my name. . . .

Extraordinary, of course, the coincidence which had brought him to the station at that time. Yet such things do happen. He was, he told me, anxious about a shipment from some mail-order house which was long overdue. He had come down to ask about it—it was, he added, merely some rat-poisons for his estate—and had found me talking to the old man. He had known me instantly.

But certainly I should never have known Arthur Marsden. Ten years, of course, work some alteration in any man. But never before—and I pray God never again—have I beheld such a hideous change in mortal clay! Marsden's bowed and sagging shoulders, his seamed and wrinkled face, his whitened and thinning locks might have belonged to a man of sixty. His voice had become a thin and reedy piping that was eery to hear. His

clothing, though excellent in cut and tailoring, hung from his wasted frame as rags of flesh hang from a skeleton's ribs. And his spotless linen was no whiter than was his skin!

All this and more ten years had done to the young collegian I had known. He had become a creature to be regarded with pity and contempt even by the old station-master. There was covert sneering in the "cajun's" voice as he spoke of the missing consignment. And though he promised to make a search for it, still it was plain that his one desire was to be rid of Marsden.

Having thus been balked in his errand, Marsden turned his attention to me. And as time hung heavy on my hands in the hot, filthy little station, I was glad to accept his suggestion that I check my handbags and pay a visit to his house.

"I live there all alone," he said, pathetically. "I'm the last of the Marsdens, you know. And I—have few visitors!"

So at length we left the station to stroll along the single crooked street of Marsdenville. Our destination was the sprawling old white-pillared mansion I had glimpsed through the trees, beyond the "General Store" and the few scattered houses that made up the town in its entirety.

As we passed along the narrow, cracked sidewalks through the hamlet, I could not but wonder at the attitude toward us of the few inhabitants we met along the way. One would have expected deference, even servility, toward the leading citizen of the place. Instead, I more than once saw men cross the single street to avoid meeting us. Strange, almost hostile glances followed us. As for the negroes we met, those simple children of Africa turned and fled from our approach, their eyeballs bulging as they peered over black shoulders in almost comic terror!

Poor Marsden was pitiably anxious to conceal this universal avoidance of his presence from me. Nor could I in mere politeness fail to overlook it. And yet in my brain there stirred a great and growing perplexity.

Soon, however, we found the town and its inhabitants had been left behind. Our shoes scuffed the dust of a road that made no pretense of being paved or even traversed. It wound amid dense shrubbery, and ancient trees overhung it and grass grew freely in its ruts. Great trailing tendrils of Spanish moss touched ghostly fingers to our faces as we brushed past them. The hush of complete isolation brooded everywhere. Only the distant "lap-lapping" of the river broke it.

I realized, with a kind of shudder, that a sort of deadline must have been drawn between the village and the ancient mansion ahead of us. It had been literally years since vehicular traffic had stirred the dust in those ruts, and even visitors on foot must be a rarity.

I do not recall a word of our conversation along that endless, shadowed lane. I must have spoken brokenly and disconnectedly; for my thoughts were elsewhere. As for Marsden, I recall only that his voice ran on and on, in that piping weary monotone. I got the impression that he dared not stop talking, that he feared the very silence that would come when our voices died!

We had almost reached our destination when I stumbled over a little furry object and halted involuntarily. Limp and bloody, it sprawled there in the dust of the road. I am not normally fond of cats, yet I felt a throb of pity now.

There was, I realized as I bent over the creature, no hope of saving its life. It was, indeed, already dead, although the body was still warm. The throat and the belly had been ripped open, and viscera protruded like maggots from the gashes.

I could make nothing of those curiously jagged wounds, nor did the myriad tiny prints in the dust about the corpse convey anything to me. Yet I was conscious that they were very odd prints indeed. In the dim light, I almost took them for the marks of tiny human hands!

At length I stood up. "Weasels?" I queried. "The kitten is quite dead. I hope it wasn't a pet."

Marsden looked at me with haunted eyes. "Weasels, of course," he muttered. "Ah God! Why don't those poisons come? We're overrun——"

He let the sentence hang there. After a moment we walked on. We left the little corpse to its cloud of buzzing flies.

Yet, weasels do not make tracks like human hand-prints. That I knew. Nor do they hunt in packs. . . .

THE lawns that fronted the great house were spacious but ill-tended. As we crossed them a surly thug in gardener's livery looked up to growl a greeting. Beyond the wide veranda a great mahogany door was opened for us by a second servant, a swarthy brute whose butler's frock-coat accorded ill with an unshaven chin. White servants in the Deep South! I marveled. Truly Marsden must be a man of eccentric tastes.

We followed the "butler" (for obviously both he and the other servants were mere tramps or gangsters pressed into domestic service) along a long, dark, paneled hall. It opened into a vast room where finely bound books covered every wall in tiers, where fine ancestral portraits and shaded lamps and great overstuffed leather chairs invited us. It had once been a most impressive place, this library of Marsden House. Now dust and decay and dirt befouled it everywhere. "Renovated in its entirety," the phrase sprang ironically into my mind. For certainly this room had not been cleaned, much less renovated, in many years.

Yet there was no scarcity of servants to clean it, I noticed. It was not the butler who brought us tinkling mint-juleps in frosted glasses. It was still a third hireling, in a soiled white drill jacket. He spilled a portion of my drink on my coat-sleeve, and I noted the bulge of a revolver against his ribs as he bent to swab futilely at the stain with a handkerchief.

I should have thought more about this fact had not my attention been distracted by the yapping and growling and barking that went on constantly about me. For Arthur Marsden had assembled a most bizarre menagerie in his house. There must have been a dozen mongrel terriers cooped up in this one long room. They fought and scratched fleas and scampered everywhere. Among them great battered tom-cats stalked, evil-eyed and snarling. And once I could have sworn I saw a dark, slim bulk that was neither cat nor dog gliding among the shadows. Either it was a mongoose or else my eyes played tricks.

Manners would hardly permit my questioning my host on this strange collection. After all, the poor devil was plainly a sort of social pariah in this town. It was only natural that he should seek companionship in animals. To live all alone in this great barn of a house would not be pleasant. Pets would at least lighten the monotony.

Yet though I did not care to mention the animals, they greatly disturbed me. So did the dull and persistent hammering that was constantly going on in some distant part of the mansion. It made the futile conversation of my host rather hard to follow. "I'm having some repairs made," he had explained that hammering not once but a score of times. And

somehow his very insistence on the prosaic explanation was odd.

And yet it seemed absurd to doubt him. There was visible evidence of renovation in this very room; for strips of heavy sheet-iron flashing had been nailed along the juncture of walls and ceiling and floor, forming a gleaming metallic frame for every door and window. I could not see the exact utility of these iron strips, but supposed that they formed some sort of support for the ancient walls. And I knew well that the nailing of such metal supports elsewhere in the house would produce exactly such a sound as now disturbed me; yet I remained oddly upset by that distant metallic pounding, like the beat of some gigantic, evil metal heart.

I must admit, however, that the repeated liquid refreshment that Marsden pressed on me soon overcame my vexation. In time I came to ignore the distractions altogether; for, sitting here in the cool room and listening to the monotonous droning of my host's voice, I seemed most strangely to lose track of the passage of time. It was pleasant, after all, to sit there with the coolness of fine Bourbon and crushed mint in my throat; pleasant to loll in the great leather chair; pleasant to chat lightly, vaguely, my mind more than half on other matters the while; pleasant to look up at those ceiling-mounting tiers of books about me, to speculate on the forgotten wisdom their pages must hold; pleasant just to sit and rest there in the quiet dusk. . . .

Then suddenly I became aware, with a feeling almost of panic at the realization, that I had long overstayed my time here. Those juleps! They must have drugged me. I could barely see Marsden's white face across the room, and the window behind his chair was only a gray blur against the black walls. I had passed hours in this room, I realized. It was now almost night.

Marsden sprang up when I did. The fellow was profuse in apologies and explanations. He had, he said, been so interested in my talk that he had forgotten all about my train. It must have gone through the junction at least an hour ago, he explained. Nor would there be another until the following afternoon. I could, of course, motor some thirty miles to Ferriday, where a local train would go through shortly before dawn. But, Marsden lamented, he had no car to lend me for the journey. And he did not know whether one could be obtained in the village.

It was plain that he was anxious to have me spend the night with him. And indeed, I was inclined to agree with him, once my first chagrin had faded. The strangeness of this old house and its occupants had filled me with a desperate curiosity. I wanted to see more of it. And I had no stomach for a jolting cross-country race to board a long-past-midnight train. Here, Marsden assured me, I might have a comfortable bed and a dinner that would include quails and a crayfish bouillabaisse and a bottle—oh yes, several bottles—of a most excellent wine.

And so I found myself, an hour later, donning fresh linen after a refreshing shower-bath.

I HAD been snugly established in an upper bedroom of the mansion and was very pleased to be there. The tramp-like butler had hurried down to the village for my luggage, and had then doubled as valet in a manner surprizingly deft and efficient. And the big room, with its rich rugs and fine old furniture, was a revelation. I relaxed in the mellow glow of lamplight and decided that life at Marsden House was pleasant, after all. The contents of a crystal-glass decanter I

found beside my bed did not fail to confirm this decision. I even recall whistling merrily as I dressed.

Absently I noted, moving about the room with a guest's curiosity, that the inevitable metal flashings reinforced every corner of it. The great Colonial bedstead, too, was strengthened by heavy bands welded about its legs. This was natural enough, I decided. Centuries of river mists would have rotted every bit of wood in the house. Yet I did rather wonder at the whimsy of design these supports displayed. They were inexplicably funnel-shaped, with wide flaring bottoms like skirts. They looked like nothing so much as the shields that are placed on ship hawsers to keep rats from climbing aboard.

I was still puzzled over them, and listening idly to a vague but incessant rustling that I took to be the sound of the river near by, when my valet-butler came in to announce dinner. My host, he added, would be waiting for me on the floor below.

I snapped the locks on my valises before I left the room, for I did not trust the fellow alone with them. Then I went out into the dim corridor. I had to grope slowly along in it, and had only gotten half-way to the stairs when a sudden sound crashed out behind me and filled the hall with eery echoes.

I whirled and ran back toward my room. There could be no mistaking that sound, and my heart was pounding wildly as I reached my door. It was dark, however, and the servant was just emerging from it as I came up.

"It's all right, sir," he grated. "I just fell over a chair in th' dark, sir! Made a lot of noise, didn't it?"

The stink of gunpowder was everywhere in the corridor to belie his words. I elbowed past him and relit the lamps in my room. I don't know what I expected to find in there. There was nothing, of course. The room was in immaculate order.

There was only that reek of powder to attest that this "valet" of mine had fired a gun at someone or something in my room not a minute before. At someone or something that had not been there when I left the room, that was not there now. And that had somehow come and gone without leaving any trace. . . .

I hurried back along that corridor and down the old creaking staircase as though a fiend of hell ran at my heels!

DINNER that night in Marsden House was a weird meal. Not that I had any fault to find with the food: it was superb, and the accompanying wines were all that Marsden had claimed. As for the service, it was impeccable from fine old chinaware to massive silver candelabra which supplied the only light in the long, shadowed room.

No, the fault was in none of these things. It lay rather in a certain air of strain and tension that grew worse as the meal progressed. The rat-eyed butler's face was impassive as he bent over the table, nor did Marsden betray nervousness in word or gesture, though his eyes were agonized. But the two hulking men in the white jackets who were recruited to assist in the service were obviously frightened half out of their wits. Their cauliflower ears were strained to catch every sound. They started at shadows. Their gorilla-like hands were trembling so that they could barely handle the dishes.

The pack of mongrel dogs roamed here and there in the dining-room as they pleased, but there was no yapping or fighting here. The little beasts were oddly quiet. They were incessantly sniffing along the old paneled walls, nosing beneath the moldering tapestries, sitting

with little heads cocked and ears erect. Among them the great tom-cats skulked grimly, displaying no interest in the food on the long table or in us. Man and beast seemed vigilantly alert, seemed to wait some unholy invasion, prepared for some calamity beyond my power to conjecture.

And thus dragged on the many courses of the meal, while my nerves absorbed the tenseness until I too was quivering with expectancy; until I too sat rigid and taut in my chair, ready to cope with some incredible and unimaginable emergency; until I should not have been surprized at the sudden uprushing of any horror, the invasion of any alien and menacing presence or presences of evil. Sweat formed on my brow. Strange, electric pricklings stole in the roots of my hair.

Yet nothing happened. There was not the slightest untoward incident to explain this tension to clarify the brooding mystery that hung over the room. The courses came and went, and at last there was only brandied coffee and cigars on the table, and the ordeal was at an end. The three servants withdrew, two of them almost staggering in their eagerness to get away. Most of the dogs and cats went with them, though a few elected to doze or wander about the room. I felt them touch my legs at intervals beneath the table, and their eternal sniffing intruded on every lull in our conversation. Yet obviously their extreme vigilance was at an end. The crisis, whatever it was, had definitely been passed.

We sat long about the candle-lit table, Marsden and I. He had inveigled me into talking about myself, my aims and aspirations; and it is a topic to which almost any man does justice. He proved the ideal listener, too. If at times I got the impression that he was harkening more to distant sounds in the house than to my words, at least he contrived to make the right remarks at proper intervals. So I talked on and on, while the candles dissolved imperceptibly on tall silver sconces, and an old clock in the hall punctuated my every pause for breath with a solemn metallic comma.

At length a slight hoarseness and the frail flickering of the candlelight warned me of the lateness of the hour. I flagged in my monolog, and Marsden was quick to catch the hint. He proposed that we retire, though I could see that he did it unwillingly.

And so we went out into the great hoary lower hall, where ancient beams arched blackly overhead and a vagrant breeze tinkled the crystal pendants of the chandeliers. These chandeliers, I noted, held electric bulbs; but as my host used only candlelight, I assumed that some accident had crippled the power-wires and left him thus dependent on more primitive luminance.

The somber rooms of the old house seemed more sinister now, for the candles gave little light beyond the hallway. Seemingly all the villainous-looking servants had retired after the meal, for we met none of them. Occasional dogs slept with snores and wheezes on the floors. I tripped over more than one little body as we walked toward the stair; and once, when my outstretched hand touched the soft fur of a cat, I felt an electric thrill of fear.

Marsden's nervousness seemed quite as great as my own. For a few short hours after the meal he had seemed almost to be his former self, had been at least the shadow of the Arthur Marsden of my university days. Now he had grown old and sick with dread again. The hand that held a candle aloft to light the way for us was crooked like a claw to keep it from trembling. And when he turned to make some casual remark, I could hardly

believe that the white and haggard face I saw was not some hideous mask. . . .

It is now that I approach that portion of my narrative in which care must be exercised in the telling. For the events that followed left me in a state of utter mental and physical collapse; and the greater part of my recollections have been mercifully blanked out from a brain taxed beyond its capacity to endure. Fantasy and fact, reality and delirium are oddly blended in my remembrance of that night at Marsden House. I must beware lest I confuse them utterly in the telling.

Suffice it to say that I felt a curious reluctance to return to my bedroom that night. And after Marsden had left me there and departed, his candle throwing grotesque shadows along the corridor outside, I felt even more disturbed. The room was hot and stuffy, I recall, and somehow I felt that the stuffiness was like the lull that comes before the breaking of a tropic storm. A strange inner prompting of danger was beginning to grow in my brain. The myriad mysteries of this strange mansion and its tragic owner had begun to shape themselves into a dreadful subconscious *hinting* that was all but unendurable.

It was only by an effort of the will that I forced myself to remain within that dim-lit room, to remove my clothing and don a suit of pajamas, even to extinguish the bedside lamp and crawl into that great canopied bed.

Just why I forced myself to do these things I do not know. Certainly they had no purpose. I could not sleep, I was never further from sleep in all my life! Every muscle of my body was tense and strained; every thought in my busy brain was groping for a solution of all these mysteries This young-old recluse in his rotting mansion by the lapping, eternal river—what ghastly menace had grayed his hair and blanched his face, had driven him to hire gangsters as servants, accumulate this imbecilic horde of mongrel animals? What threatened Arthur Marsden, that he should be ever vigilant and fearful within the four walls of his own house? Into what jigsaw puzzle of horror and madness had I so unwittingly strayed?

No need to retrace for the reader my tangled threads of speculation. They led me nowhere; yet I was conscious of an ever-mounting uneasiness and dread as I lay there in the darkness. Some hidden sense kept warning me of danger.

I do not recall the precise moment when I realized that I was *listening* for this danger instead of looking for it in the darkened room. I cannot say just when I realized that the murmurous, rustling, incessant sound that echoed in my ears was not the distant river at all, had never been the river!

That sound was in the very walls of my room—the walls, the ceiling of it, even the floor! They were—alive! Life teemed behind its ancient boards; life that crawled and scratched and slithered and raced; life that must have been engendered by centuries of neglect and darkness; that had made a seething network of corridors and passageways and tunnels in the very wood and mortar that seemed so solid about me!

Lizards, rats, roaches—what infinity of slithering forms were generating this incredible symphony of sounds I could only conjecture. I tried to tell myself that their presence in these hoary walls was natural enough. What old house is without its vermin?

And yet I knew, even while I reasoned thus, that my reasoning was absurd; for it was not the presence but the *numbers* of this hidden, crawling horde that was so disturbing. A vast, surging tide of them there must be, so great that it awed

and baffled the hearer to estimate their multitude; so great that it seemed almost that the great house should tremble and palpitate with their incessant point-counterpoint of movement. The sound of them grew in my ears until it was like the sound of the sea; until it tortured the nerves like the rush of a great wind; until it numbed the brain and baffled Reason itself with its damnable suggestion of myriads inconceivable and incalculable.

At length the listening to those goblin hordes so wore my nerves that they could not longer endure it. I sat up, lit my bedside lamp. With its glare the pulsing madness about me seemed to recede a little, and the fantasmagoria of horror my mind had been rearing seemed less credible than in darkness. Yet there was no real slackening in that incessant movement in my walls; for the welling crescendo of minute life seethed on.

Furious at this continued disturbance, I determined to dress myself and have a turn about the house, to see if other rooms were similarly infested. For though it seemed madness to suppose that this one room held all the vermin of Marsden House, yet I shrank from contemplation of the infinity of vermin life implied by its being universal throughout the entire building. Great God! No wonder poor Marsden kept that infinity of dogs and cats about him! No wonder he had ordered poisons and been distressed by their failure to arrive. The mystery of the eviscerated and dying kitten in the road, of the vigilant servants at meal-time, was no mystery now. Life here must be a constant battle for possession against these hordes. I understood the purpose of that reinforcing metal over every crack and crevice. I understood, in fine, many things.

But what in Sanity's name, I wondered as I dressed, could have led these creatures to congregate here in such impossible numbers? What weird purpose held them penned up in the old walls of Marsden House?

My dressing did not take long, for I was afire with curiosity. And I should have been out of the room and engrossed in searching every nook and cranny of the house, had not my attention been suddenly distracted. I had previously noted a small leather-bound book on the table by my bed. Now I carelessly knocked it to the floor in rising, and on retrieving it I saw that it lay open at a page wrinkled and dog-eared with much re-reading, and that marginal entries were scrawled on every unprinted inch of that page in ink like faded blood.

I paid scant attention to the printed matter on that page. "Legends" was the only word in the book's title I could decipher, and the tale on that opened page was a legend if ever there was one. It was impossible to imagine why anyone could have so pitifully, incessantly re-read it as those dog-eared and crumpled pages indicated. In these days of gangsters and mass-murder, the Lorde Myrsdenne of Transylvania or some such place who in 1790 locked up rebellious peasants in a barn and set fire to the barn would seem a petty tyrant indeed. And since their cries in dying doubtless did sound like the squeaking of mice, why should he not have said so? Anyone who could see a connection between his saying and the plague of mice that allegedly came up from beneath Myrsdenne Castle and devoured the lord and all his retainers would nowadays be regarded as fit subject for a lunacy commission. Nor would anyone take seriously the asseveration that all Myrsdenne's line would be cursed. . . .

As I say, it was not this fantastic and improbable folk-tale which held me there. It was the row of dates scrawled painfully in the page's margins. Opposite each date

there was a name, and apparently it was some sort of calendar or record of events over several generations. Only opposite the last name entered was there a blank space left.

And that name, barely legible in the dim light, was "Arthur Marsden"!

I suppose I must have cried out as the realization of this burst fully upon me. I recall stumbling over the lamp-table as I rushed toward the door and saw the lamp smash blazingly on a rug. But none of this mattered; for at that very moment, as if my discovery had been the signal for an elaborately rehearsed drama to begin its tragic play, there broke out from somewhere in the old house a most incredible clamoring and the yelping of tortured dogs and a high sustained shrieking that was the most horrible thing I have ever listened to. And mingled with this devil's cacophony I heard the stammering of revolver fire and the howls and curses of sorely embattled men.

It is at this point that my clear recollections wholly desert me and sheer delirium replaces coherent observation. I know that I yanked my door open and sprang out into the black hall and found it seething with sound and motion. I know that stabbing pains tormented my ankles and that my boots crunched on myriads of small shrieking entities in the darkness and that the walls and floor and even ceiling of that passage seemed beaded with small, moving points of light!

And as I kicked and stamped and cursed my way along that haunted corridor of squeaking nightmare, I saw an open, lighted doorway ahead. I knew that it led to Marsden's room. Evidently he feared to sleep in darkness; for there was no time for him to have lit the dozens of guttering lamps that lined the place and made it bright as day as I dashed in for sanctuary against the invisible horde in that demon-haunted corridor.

The shrieks had stopped before I burst in there. And not even when I saw the great bed in one corner of the room did I grasp the full horror that had come upon Arthur Marsden.

I knew, of course, that he was dead, even before I saw the black pall that covered him as he sprawled in his blood there on the sheets. But for one awful, frozen moment I stood there wondering at that sable drapery, without realizing what it was. And then I saw that it moved and heaved and pulsed in a manner that no possible draft could make cloth behave. I saw that the glittering specks that gemmed it were not jewels, nor were the innumerable little pink cords that waved and twisted on it the conceits of some fantastic embroidery.

The rest is yammering madness, best forgotten. I made some crazy sound, and at the sound that shroud which cloaked the dissolving corpse broke and seemed to flow off the bed and toward me. I fled from it, shrieking crazily; I fled before that slithering horde of bloody, ravening atomies; down, down the high-vaulted staircase I fled and burst the door of Marsden House and rushed into the night. And behind me, as I ran, the sky grew red. . . .

THEY let me out of the hospital last week — the hospital in thirty-miles-distant Ferriday where I had lain, a giggling, moaning wreck, for many days. They tried to tell me there that Arthur Marsden had died in the fire that destroyed his old house that night and left only a heap of charred wreckage there by the ancient, lapping river to show that it had ever stood. There had never been any curse, they said, nor any devouring horde of mice, and I must realize that my own delirious fancy had conjured it all.

And I pretended that I believed them. Why not?

But now I have set down at last the whole story of what really happened to Arthur Marsden. And I know now that it will also happen to me. No one but myself can hear that seething rustle in my walls, as goblin hordes gather to blot out the memory of the horror from the last living witness to it. For to me that age-old Myrsdenne curse has been transmitted, a dread contagion that nothing can allay. And hark! Even now that slithering and scratching grows nearer. . . .

But I have beaten them! I have told my story! And now I shall have the courage that poor Marsden lacked! I will dare the final deed which shall release me utterly. The gun glints on my table as I pen these lines.

It will not lie there long. . . .

The Blue Room

By GORDON PHILIP ENGLAND

The story of a haunted chamber and a fatal hoax

POLLOCK scowled. His long, slender fingers, adeptly manipulating the euchre deck, betrayed a degree of nervous tension. He wished that Creighton and Duquette, at the table opposite, would hold their tongues. Ever since the two had entered the 77 Club half an hour before, they had been chattering like magpies. And the tommyrot they were spouting hindered him from concentrating upon his game of solitaire.

But, despite Pollock's wishes, the conversation at the other table continued unrelentingly.

The big, blond Englishman bent forward, his steel-blue eyes boring the fascinated black ones of the swarthy-faced little Frenchman. His voice was solemn:

"Yes, Duquette, I used to doubt, myself—but that was before I leased Doom Manor. After living there awhile, the most pronounced skeptic would be convinced."

Duquette nodded sober agreement.

"True, *mon ami.* I myself was skeptical until I saw your so-horrible Blue Chamber. But, after viewing it, and studying the records, only a fool would remain incredulous. *Moi,* Joseph Napoleon Duquette, I am no coward. Without fear of contradiction, I assert that I am as brave as the next fellow. Yet—name of a green monkey!—I would not sleep in that room—not for all the wealth of India."

Creighton blew a reflective smoke ring.

"And I don't blame you. A pity for Adams that he couldn't have been as discreet! Sad case, Adams. I really almost hated to take his money, after what happened. But a bet's a bet."

"Yes, certainly. Besides, Adams will

not miss the two hundred pounds. He is still in the sanitarium, is he not?"

Creighton flipped his cigarette stub into an ash-tray. His voice grew reminiscent:

"He must be; I haven't heard of his being released. When we found him he was a raving maniac. You could hear his screams from within the cottage, quarter of a mile away. I have always believed it was after the sixth shot that he went mad."

Duquette twirled his wax-ended black mustache.

"Ah, yes. And his automatic was empty, you say?"

Creighton made a silent sign of affirmation.

"But of course," Duquette shook his head gravely, "to attempt to shoot an apparition is the height of imbecility. For against a specter, you comprehend, bullets are useless."

"Of course. But Adams was a skeptic, you know. More—he was a dead shot. He had absolute faith in his ability as a marksman. And—to do him justice—he must have kept his nerve well up until the last. Six of the bullet holes in the wall are within a small radius, at about the height of a woman's heart. It was only the seventh, last shot, that went wild. That is why I think it was after the sixth that he cracked."

"Doubtless you are correct. Well, as you remarked, *mon ami,* it was a sad business. At least, however, Adams' fate has had a salutary effect upon other unbelievers. No one has taken you up on the bet again, I understand."

Creighton's laugh was scornful.

"No fear. No one would have the nerve."

By now Pollock was distinctly annoyed. Suddenly, he threw down his cards and sprang to his feet. He strode wrathfully across to the other table.

"Look here," he began hotly, "I couldn't help hearing your conversation. Now, let me introduce myself. I'm Jimmy Pollock. And I kick every black cat out of my way, walk under ladders regularly, smash thirteen mirrors a year just for luck—and spill salt at least once a week. What I mean, gentlemen, I don't believe in disembodied spirits, apparitions and such balderdash. If this chap Adams you were gassing about shot seven times at your dashed spook and registered seven misses, he must have been a rotten shot. There never was a ghost yet that a bullet wouldn't kill!"

Creighton and Duquette exchanged significant glances; then the former addressed the interrupter frigidly:

"Let me be sure that I understand you, my friend. You say you are a skeptic. A disbeliever in returned spirits?"

Jimmy Pollock thrust out his hard, lean jaw aggressively.

"Ghosts are bunkum!"

"A large statement, and one you'll find it difficult to prove. Well, put up or shut up!"

"Eh?" Pollock blinked at him.

"Put up or shut up," repeated Creighton. He drew a hand from his pocket and threw down on the table a two-hundred pound note. "If you're ready to back up your boast, cover that. My friend Duquette here will hold the stakes."

Pollock drew out his own billfold. He extracted a matching note and fingered it tentatively.

"What are the terms of the bet?" he rasped.

"The same as with Adams," explained Creighton. "You will arrive at Doom Manor at eleven next Friday night. It will be, I may mention, Friday the thirteenth. But, of course, as you are not superstitious, that little item won't inter-

est you. You will, upon arrival, accompany me to the Blue Room, and after you have examined it thoroughly I shall lock you in. There will be a portable telephone connected with Jasmine Cottage, and Duquette or myself will be ready to answer a call at any time. You will have no light except the moon-rays filtering in through the iron-barred window. If you like, you can keep that window partly raised, so that if you start to scream as Adams did, we can hear you at the cottage.

"I'll give you a .45 automatic containing seven cartridges. If you remain in the room overnight without calling or phoning for help, and come out at six next morning alive and well, you win the wager. If, however, you summon assistance, go off your head, or are found dead, you forfeit your stake. . . . Well, how about it? Are you game?"

Pollock thought for a moment. Creighton noticed his hesitation. He laughed contemptuously.

"Oh, of course, if you're afraid——"

Pollock cut in sharply: "Afraid? Don't make me laugh. Of course I'm not."

He slapped down his note upon Creighton's, then added another. "If you're not afraid yourself, Creighton, cover that. I'd like to get back what you took from poor Adams, as well. . . . Right! Now, bring on your spook!"

At five minutes to eleven on the following Friday night, Creighton and Duquette stood on the porch at Jasmine Cottage staring down the drive. Creighton broke the silence:

"You think he'll really come?"

Duquette nodded with conviction.

"Oh yes, he has nerve enough, I think. . . . Everything is prepared?"

"I think so. . . . Oh look, car lights! That must be our friend now."

Then Creighton uttered an exclamation.

"Oh yes, I forgot. The automatic. I put it away after filling the magazine this afternoon, you know—in the top left-hand drawer of my desk. Better run up and get it, while I welcome our ghost-hunter."

"*Bon.* I will join you at the manor-house."

So while Creighton went out to greet Pollock, the little Frenchman hurried up to his friend's room for the pistol. Without troubling to snap on the switch, he felt his way across to the desk, opened the drawer, and took out the automatic. With a grunt of satisfaction, he pocketed it.

Bounding down the stairs, Duquette hastened up to the manor-house, where he found the other two men awaiting him.

"Well," said Creighton, "I think we are ready. Shall we inspect the room immediately?"

"Suits me." Pollock was laconic.

Creighton silently led the way up some stairs. At the end of a corridor lay the Blue Room. He snapped on the single light.

"Well, here we are," he observed briskly.

Pollock glanced about him. The room —a fairly large one—contained a large four-poster bed, beside which was a small stand holding the telephone. Upon a side wall opposite the bed hung a hideous full-length picture depicting a bloody-handed spectral figure in the act of strangling a child. This horrible painting might have shaken the nerves of the superstitious, but to the skeptic appeared merely disgusting.

"The johnny that perpetrated that atrocity," he remarked caustically, "must have had a bad case of the D. Ts. . . . I suppose the books go with it."

As he spoke, Pollock stepped across to a well-filled, built-in book-case. He glanced carelessly at a few of the titles. All were decidedly suggestive. *Uncanny Yarns, Tales of Wandering Spirits, The Headless Cavalier*—and the like.

At random Pollock pulled out a book (it was *Bedtime Tales*) and opened it. The first words to catch his eye were these:

> The screams continued for some minutes, while the terrified servants battered frantically at the heavy oaken door, then died into a faint but no less horrible gibbering. When finally the domestics broke in they found their master squatting in the chimney-corner mouthing imbecilities. So white had grown his hair—raven-black an hour before—that they scarcely recognized him. But it was his forehead that held their attention most. Across it was the imprint of a woman's blood-stained hand. It——"

Pollock snapped the book shut and returned it to the shelf. From behind him sounded the lugubrious voice of Creighton:

"Perhaps, Mr. Pollock, you are unacquainted with the history of the Blue Room? Doom Manor, so tradition says, was owned five hundred years ago by Sir Austin Fairholm. The knight married a girl named Ann Fenriss, whose mother was reputed to have been a witch. On her wedding night Ann, in a fit of insane jealousy, strangled Sir Austin as he lay asleep; then, cheating the hangman, hanged herself inside this clothes closet." Creighton pointed to a gaping empty doorway at the farther end of the room. "If you will step inside, you will see the large steel hook in the rafter overhead. It was from that that they found the body suspended."

Creighton's voice sank to a hollow whisper:

"Every night, between midnight and dawn, the apparition is said to appear. If by any chance anyone is asleep in the bed, the specter strangles him, then hangs itself from the hook, where it remains until daybreak."

Pollock forced a laugh.

"A female strangler, eh? Say, it looks as if I'd get my money's worth."

CREIGHTON and Duquette looked at him solemnly, without speaking. Their expressions were so unpleasant that, in spite of himself, the skeptic knew a moment's uneasiness. He covered his momentary qualms with another laugh.

"Well, if you have finished with your childish exhibits, suppose we get down to business." He drew an official-looking document from his breast pocket. "Here, if you two will just witness to this, please. Nothing like having everything regular, you know."

"Why, what's this?" Creighton took the paper suspiciously. Coolly Pollock explained:

"Oh, just a little formality. Merely a statement of the terms of the wager, and your promise that if my bullets do any mischief I shall not be held responsible. I want you to understand, gentlemen, that if I do see any unknown moving object in this room tonight I will shoot. Any human being who tries impersonating your lady strangler will do so at the risk of his own skin!"

Creighton smiled.

"No fear, Mr. Pollock. I can see that you are a determined—although sadly mistaken—young man. And neither my friend nor myself has any intention of serving as a pistol target. No, no, my dear fellow, if you are visited by an apparition tonight, I can guarantee that it will be a genuine specter. And if you want to blaze away at it, why, go ahead. Your bullets won't have much effect, though, I'm afraid. You can see where Adams' went."

He waved his hand meaningly toward a number of bullet-holes in the wall opposite them. Pollock's gaze followed thoughtfully. He noted that, as Creighton had observed at the London club, the seventh bullet had gone wild. Involuntarily he shuddered, but quickly recovered.

"Well, then, if you'll just sign, please."

"Oh, by all means, by all means." Hastily, Creighton scrawled his signature; then Duquette followed suit. Pollock took back the paper, waved it in the air to dry the ink, then nodded with satisfaction and slipped the folded document into his pocket.

"Thank you very much, gentlemen. Well, I think I'm ready, then. But—hold on a minute. What about that gun?"

"Duquette will give it to you before we leave," assured Creighton. "But first, another small formality. You're not allowed matches, you know, nor other means of making a light. Just to make certain that you haven't accidentally overlooked any such forbidden articles, you won't object to our searching you?"

They searched very thoroughly, finding no matches, but unkindly confiscating an efficient cigarette-lighter; then they stood back, smiling.

"Well," growled the skeptic, "I hope you're satisfied. And now, one question, please. Suppose I shoot this dashed apparition—and kill it? What shall I do then?"

Creighton smiled superiorly.

"My dear fellow, you *can't* shoot a ghost. It simply isn't done, you know."

Pollock's answering smile was unpleasant.

"No? Well, gentlemen, I am a sure shot, and if an apparition shows itself, I will shoot to kill. In the eventuality that I am successful, what am I to do?"

"Oh, in that case," returned Creighton airily, "you can call us on the phone and inform us. But, if you do, in order to win the bet you'll have to produce your victim."

"Fair enough. . . . Here, what are you doing with that light?"

For Creighton was coolly starting to unscrew the electric bulb.

"Wait!" snapped Pollock sharply. "I want that gun!"

Duquette flashed faultlessly white teeth.

"A thousand pardons, *monsieur*. I had almost forgotten." He drew the pistol from his pocket with a flourish. "A most efficient weapon, complete with a fresh clip of cartridges." He tendered the automatic with a mocking bow.

"Fair enough," repeated Pollock, pocketing the pistol with an air of supreme contentment. "Well, then, gentlemen, I needn't detain you any longer. See you in the morning."

The skeptic heard the grate of the key in the lock, the click of the bolt, then a sound of retreating footsteps. After that there was nothing but ominous silence.

As he turned to go over to the bed, Pollock's gaze fell upon the picture. With a startled exclamation, he leapt back.

Little wonder the ghost-hunter was startled. The forms in the portrait had undergone a horrifying transformation. Hideous under the electric light, they were a hundred times more so in darkness. An unearthly light seemed to emanate from the picture faces, and the eyes of the ghost strangler glowed like balls of flame.

For some moments Pollock gazed at the ghastly figures in horrified fascination; then, suddenly, he laughed shakily.

"By Jove, that surely fooled me for a minute," he admitted to himself frankly.

"Of course, though, the explanation's simple. Those beauties touched up the figures with some kind of phosphorescent paint. . . . No wonder that poor devil Adams went mad!"

Now that he understood the trick, the picture did not seem so terrifying; so, turning his back upon it, Pollock went over to the bed. He sat down upon it and waited.

Minutes passed. Pollock caught himself listening. Of course any apparently spiritual manifestation this night would be the work of human agencies. On the other hand, there was something he distinctly disliked about the whole atmosphere of the place. He never had fancied such ancient houses much, anyway. A great deal must have happened here since the building had been erected. Could that story about the female strangler be true? Of course it might be. Horrible things of such a nature had occurred in other houses in medieval times, so why not in Doom Manor?

Something stirred and groaned in a corner of the room. Pollock held his breath and waited. Presently he heard a strange, rustling sound. It seemed to come from the clothes closet.

The skeptic drew out his automatic and pointed it toward the empty doorway. But now all was still again.

Pollock clutched his gun tighter and waited. Five minutes passed . . . ten . . . fifteen. But nothing moved again. The ghost-hunter laughed mirthlessly.

"I must have been just hearing things. There wasn't anything."

Then he started. As if to belie his assertion, he heard the thing again. But this time the apparition grew more versatile. After uttering a hollow groan, it clanked a chain.

Then again all was silent. Pollock cursed softly.

"By the lord Harry," he exclaimed, his voice oddly shrill and tremulous, "I'm going to have a look in that closet!"

Resolutely, Pollock groped his way over to the doorway. Pistol in hand, he stood a few feet from the entrance, waiting for the thing to show itself. But all remained silent as the tomb.

The skeptic waited a few moments longer, then cautiously advanced. Something was in that clothes closet. Either that, or else his imagination had been tricking him. He went closer to that empty, gaping doorway. Still no sound. Then he crept over and peered in. He saw nothing. Growing bolder, he stepped inside the closet and felt about it.

But the closet was empty!

THE very emptiness of the place unnerved the skeptic. His groping hand came in contact with the steel hook. Its feel sent an involuntary shudder through him. All at once, the closet seemed alive with horrors from the past.

"Ugh," shuddered Pollock, "I don't much like the feel of this place. Maybe the girl did hang herself here. . . . I'm going back to bed."

He was only half-way there when the thing groaned again. He whirled about and made a rush for the closet, only to find it empty again.

Once more the ghost-hunter retreated to the four-poster. Before long came the noise of the clanking chain, then again that ominous, nerve-racking silence.

Pollock was beginning to feel desperate.

"Look here," he called, trying to make his voice sound stern and authoritative, and feeling miserable; "I don't know who's making that unholy row, but you'd best not let me see you. You poke your ugly spook face out of that clothes closet —and I'll pump it full of lead!"

After that, no further sounds issued from the closet. Half an hour crawled

by, but the thing did not return again.

Pollock began to feel complacent. "That's fixed them," he thought. "They realize I'm a dangerous man and mean business. Well, since they've gone away, I'll see if I can't get a bit of sleep."

Slipping the automatic under his pillow, the skeptic pulled up a blanket over him, and shut his eyes. At first the remembrance of the happenings of the night kept him wide awake, but gradually he grew drowsy. Presently he slept. . . .

Exactly how long Pollock slept he couldn't have told, but suddenly he awoke. His eyes popped open. Horror-stricken, they fastened upon something in the center of the room.

It was a tall, white figure. As it glided forward toward the bed its chain clanked harshly. Then slowly it stretched out its arms. Its long, slender fingers clenched and unclenched, working nervously.

The apparition glided closer. By the phosphorescent glow emanating from the picture, and the pale moon-rays shimmering between the window-bars, the man in the bed could see it with horrible distinctness. Its hands continued to weave the air in that hideously suggestive fashion. Then the creature bent, as if about to spring.

Now convinced that this was not a nightmare but an awful reality, Pollock went into action. His hand slid beneath his pillow, drawing out his automatic. He sat up and pointed it. Although icy fingers of dread seemed clutching at his heart, his hand was steady as a rock.

"See here," the sound of his own voice startled him, "you'd better scram. I'm a dead shot, I am. Just one step nearer, mister ghost, and you're a dead spook. Dead as a leg of mutton!"

But the ghostly intruder did not appear frightened. It clanked its chain menacingly, and the long fingers continued those suggestive choking gestures. Again the thing prepared to advance.

Pollock's voise was a hoarse croak:

"For the last time, now. I'm warning you!"

Unheeding, the apparition glided forward.

Pollock pulled the trigger.

A realistic scream ripped the air. The thing sprang upward, then hit the floor with a resounding thud. It lay sprawled in a silent, huddled mass.

Pollock stared incredulously. The thing remained motionless. The skeptic uttered a cry of exultation.

"By the lord Harry," he shouted, "I've killed the ghost!"

Cautiously, he slipped one foot to the floor, then the other. After all, the spook might be shamming. He advanced with still greater caution. He poked the mass gingerly with his toe. It had a horrible feel, soft and yielding.

With a scream, the ghost-killer leapt back. He grabbed for the telephone.

A moment more, and he was ringing the cottage. A Gallic voice answered mockingly:

"Are you there? So, *mon ami,* you have had enough."

"Is that you, Duquette?" yelled Pollock. "Come on over, for God's sake! I've shot the ghost!"

He heard a startled French oath, then the click of the receiver.

Presently came the sound of running feet. The key grated in the lock and Duquette bounced in, a flashlight in his hand.

At sight of the huddled shape on the floor, he recoiled in horror.

"Mon Dieu!" he screamed.

Pollock snatched the flashlight from his trembling hand. By the rays of the electric torch he saw what lay there: a white sheeted figure, with a chain about

its waist, and a slit-eyed hood over its head. The upper part of the front of the sheet was ominously red. A trickle of crimson oozed through a hole in the cloth.

With hands as shaky as Duquette's own, Pollock pulled off the masking hood, revealing the face of Creighton. The dull, glassy eyes stared up at the ghost-killer unseeingly.

Pollock felt suddenly sick. He reeled to his feet, his face twitching.

"The fool!" he said brokenly. "Why did he do it? I warned that I'd shoot."

Duquette was shaking like a man with ague.

"But it is impossible," he whispered hoarsely. "You cannot have killed him, *monsieur*. The bullets were blanks."

Pollock stared at him in amazement; then his face hardened. He was beginning to understand. On a sudden thought, he turned the light toward the closet. A glance showed him the truth. A portion of the back wall was slid aside, disclosing a secret passage.

"So it was all a trick!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "That conversation at the club was staged for my benefit. You swine planned to treat me as you had Adams, then to fatten on my money."

Then a puzzled look crept into Pollock's eyes.

"But—I still don't understand one thing. Those bullets in the wall. Surely, Adams couldn't have missed *every time?*"

Duquette was still staring at his friend's corpse. He answered mechanically:

"But those were blanks, also, *monsieur*. The bullet-holes? Bah! We fired those shots *after* we had taken Adams from the room."

Again the Frenchman gazed amazedly at the body. As if to convince himself, he put his fingers to the wound; then, as he felt the blood, sprang back as though struck by an adder.

"But yes. He is dead, of a certainty. Name of a dog, but it is incredible! I myself saw him load the gun with blanks. Permit that I examine it, *monsieur*."

Silently Pollock handed over the weapon. Duquette inspected it unbelievingly.

"But yes. These are real bullets. Yet —*I saw him fill the magazine with blanks*."

Wonderingly, the Frenchman turned the gun over in his hands. Suddenly, his face went white as milk. His legs gave way, and he sat down heavily upon the floor.

Pollock caught him roughly by the shoulder and shook him vigorously.

"Here," he exclaimed, "what's the matter, man? What is it?"

Duquette's eyes held unfathomable horror. When he spoke, his words reflected that expression.

"Listen, *monsieur*. Tonight, before you came, Creighton sent me up for the gun. It was in the left-hand drawer of his desk."

"In the left-hand drawer?" Pollock repeated the words uncomprehendingly.

Suddenly Duquette laughed—a mirthless, hysterical laugh.

"But yes, *monsieur*. . . . Creighton had two .45 automatics of the same make, with only the serial numbers different. This one must have been in the *right-hand* drawer. *In the dark I made the mistake!*"

The Wizard's Death

By RICHARD F. SEARIGHT

The end draws near, and weakness weights my limbs;
My step is leaden, and my keen eye dims.
  No longer may my arts contrive a way
To hold the demon from his tryst with me—
Aye, soon will come the fiend to claim his fee:
  The price I pledged him on a long-past day.

Is there no way I may evade this doom?
Evade, and pass in quiet to my tomb,
  And in the saving arms of death sink down?
Ah, must I pay the frightful toll I swore,
'Mid ghastly rites of hideous primal lore,
  Should be the price of sorcerous renown?

Nay, come! Rise up from grim Plutonian deep,
Ye lesser Forms of Evil. Rise and creep
  Before my presence. Say there is a way. . . .
Ye will not speak? Ye smirk and mock at me,
And gibbering, titter with disloyal glee?
  Then, go! I'll gain my grave as best I may. . . .

The final bitter dark begins to close;
My waning vigor fades and fails, and those,
  My hasty plans, are rendered null. Now life,
As sweet to wizards as to common men,
Unversed in that dark ill beyond their ken,
  Must vanish, with its victories and strife.

My breath grows short, and like a sable pall
The horror-ridden shadows spread and fall;
  Now through the whispering blackness stirs a stray
And vagrant icy breath, and crimson eyes
Glare close and closer. Lo! I strive to rise—
  The taloned paws have seized me—aye, *I pay!*

Brother Lucifer

By CHANDLER H. WHIPPLE

Strange and spectacular was the doom that lurked in that weird book from the old, ruined monastery

IN THE book-lined study of the little cottage which stood beside the ancient church, John Druten, Vicar of Wenley, sat peering at the illumined volume before him. The hour was late; in the quiet English village, no light showed save here in the study of the vicarage; yet still John Druten read on.

The black Latin figures, painfully inscribed seven centuries before by the monks of that Wenley Abbey which was now but a tumbled ruin beyond the nearby church, seemed to blur, to take on form and dance before the vicar's eyes. All unconscious that the lamp burned low, Druten shook his head, brushed one hand across his eyes to clear his vision. He could not pause now, though his eyes dimmed; here was a strange bit of monkish history which to his antiquarian's heart was as a green field to the husbandman. He had come upon many oddities in the years that he had pored over these ancient records; yet strangely, this intrigued him more than had all the rest.

"Brother Angelico——" he mumbled for the tenth time. "Yes, he was the last. And of Brother Lucifer there is no further mention. Up to this point, the book is full of his doings; after the Eve of Saint Walburga's Day, in the Year of Grace One Thousand, Two Hundred Eighteen, there is not a word said of him. And he was but twenty-eight then. Why, it is as if he had dropped dead in the prime of his youth. . . . Yet it could not have been death which took him, else it would have been recorded here. No, he did not die—that much is certain. Why, then, he must be still alive—and seven hundred years old!"

He chuckled at his little joke, a jest at which no one save a true antiquarian would have smiled. "Lucifer." He rolled the word upon his tongue, as if it were a sip of rare old wine from the cellars of the ancient refectory, now long since crumbled to dust. "Lucifer. . . . What an odd name for a monk, anyhow! . . . Might as well have named him Beelzebub. . . . Of course, the name at that time signified bearer of light more often than it did the Devil. . . ."

Outside, a sudden wind howled weirdly around the corners of the ancient church. It was like a lost voice crying. Strange, that on this quiet spring evening a wind should so suddenly arise! It did not seem to blow elsewhere. . . .

Druten squinted, shook his head again, realized at last that the lamp was low. He turned the wick upward; but the oil was gone and little more light came. He shook his head sadly; realizing now how late was the hour, he strove for one last look at the printed page.

He shuddered from a sudden chill. It was as if that weird wind outside had entered here through the closed doors and windows, and was coursing down his back. Or—yes, it was as if someone were in the room with him, as if burning eyes were upon his back. He started at the thought, whirled quickly around.

No, there was nothing, no one there. The living-room beyond, too, seemed

empty. His mind was playing tricks upon him. Too concentrated study had put strange fancies in his head.

He turned about, closed the book regretfully. "Well, Brother Lucifer," he said sadly, "it looks as if I shall have to give up your case for the night. Shall I never find what happened to you? Must I call you back from the dead to answer this vexing question?" He smiled as he rose from his chair. "Come, Brother Lucifer," he added coaxingly, "come up from those musty vaults and tell me what happened to you in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand, Two Hundred Eighteen. . . ."

His voice trailed off. John Druten caught his breath. What were those sounds that came from the living-room beyond?

Yes, they were footsteps. . . . Light, whispering footsteps, all but soundless—yet he heard them. They were descending the stairs into the living-room, slowly—and there was a fearful thing about their sound which he could not put a name to.

JOHN DRUTEN was no coward, but now for a moment sudden panic caused him to turn as if to flee from the room and from the house.

Then he paused. Absurd of me! he thought. I must stay, else I may never know what caused the sound. Perhaps it is only my sister, come back unexpectedly from London. Or perhaps it is even some prowler who thought the place unoccupied. If so, why should I fear him? I am a good swordsman, and I shall stand him off with the rapier hanging on yonder wall. Yes, I must stay and stand the beggar off. . . .

The footsteps were near now, almost to the door of the living-room. It took eternities for John Druten to reach, silently, and grasp the rapier that hung on the wall; yet at last he held it in his hand.

Even as he brought the point up and forward, the light dimmed and went out. Thick darkness blanketed the room.

Now, though, there was light again. It was a dim light, a strange unworldly luminance.

Druten saw then that it emanated, like a phosphorescent glow, from the gray figure advancing through the doorway. At first he would hardly have called it a figure, since it seemed almost without form; but before his eyes it took on shape, became a robed grayness descending upon him. He could not see the face for the gray cowl which covered it.

"Stop where you are," Druten cried, with the rapier at ready, "or I'll run you through!"

Still the gray figure came on. With a sharp intake of breath, Druten leapt forward and thrust the sword in.

He jumped back swiftly, his face as gray as the light in the room. The blade had gone through nothingness, and the point had bent against the wall! It fell from his stiffened fingers. Even as he thrust, the rapier had grown icy cold in his hand.

Now he stood, gasping for breath, in the farthest corner of the room. He neither moved nor spoke; but he knew that someone else was speaking, that in the room was a voice. It seemed to come from the grayness, which now had ceased its slow advance and stood, as if waiting, beside his desk where lay the closed volume of monkish chronicles.

"I have come," the voice said. "You called me and I have come."

The words were spoken quietly, but in the speaking there was a sinister quality which chilled John Druten's blood. For a long moment he could not even speak.

"What—what do you want?" he managed at last.

He fancied that the face he could not

see smiled greedily. "I have waited a long time," the figure answered, "yet at last you have called me. The sin which I committed on Saint Walburga's Night seven centuries ago was, in the eyes of the holy abbot of Wenley, a fiendish thing; hence though they buried my still living body in the dank vaults of the abbey, he refused to record my death, and forbade that my name ever again be spoken.

"Thus it was that though my body breathed in the thinning air of the vault until it expired in torment, I never truly died. I lived in the damp vault, an undead soul—waiting until someone should call my name to bring me forth."

A sigh exuded from the figure, as if it recalled its long torment.

"Now my waiting is ended," it said. "Now I have only to write the account of my sin in yonder book, and the manner and time of my death, and I shall be free. My soul shall be free to do as it wills—or as the Devil wills it. . . ."

The air in the room was grown very cold, and John Druten shivered.

"I am John Druten, Vicar of Wenley," he said in his mind, "and I am not mad. No, I am as sane as the day I was born. It is only that I have studied late and am tired. This thing I am half dreaming, half seeing in my tired mind. . . ."

Had he spoken aloud? For the voice from the grayness answered him. . . . "Trouble yourself not with such matters," it said, "for you must help me, and then I shall be off. You must open the book for me at the proper place, so that I may write. . . ."

Then John Druten was certain that madness was upon him; for as if his will were no longer his own, he walked stiffly forward to the desk. He opened the book he had been reading at the page which a horrible gray finger indicated.

He stepped back then, for the cold about him was gnawing at his bones, and stood stiff and silent. And in the silence he could hear the scratching of a pen. He looked toward the desk; he saw there a blur of grayness which had human form; and through this he could see that words were appearing on the blank page of the book, words written in Latin, in an ink that was black as the farthermost pit of Hell. With a curiosity that overcame his fear, he bent forward to read.

At the words that he read, the face of the man of God became a pasty white. "No!" he shouted, "you must not write it there! It is blasphemy!"

The pen wrote on. . . .

"God in Heaven!" John Druten cried. "You must blot out every word! In Christ's name, cease writing!" He traced with his hand the sign of the cross.

Abruptly, the writing ceased. The figure seemed to sway away from him, to tremble as from fear.

Encouraged by this sign of victory, forgetting that this whole thing must be but a mad dream, John Druten rushed forward to the desk.

"Begone, fiend!" he cried wildly. "Better that you stay as you are than such foul words be written! Better your soul remain imprisoned, than roam the world to perpetrate such hideous deeds again!"

When the gray shape made no move to go, he seized from the desk a richly carved box that lay there. He raised it high above his head, menacing the fiend.

"In this box," he said in a voice more nearly calm, "repose certain relics and a fragment of the thighbone of Saint George. If you do not leave at once, I shall fling this at you and destroy your soul. In the name of Saint George and Our Lord Jesus, go!"

To his astonishment, the gray shape shuddered and whirled about. Before his eyes, it seemed slowly to dissolve. And

as it vanished, the air in the room grew warmer. . . .

But the head was last to go, and for the first time John Druten saw the face. It was more awful than the monster heads of a myriad nightmares. He thought that the lips moved, and that they said, "Against this threat I cannot stay; but I shall come back. Tomorrow I shall come back, more powerful, and finish this night's work. . . ."

Then all sign of the grayness was gone. Trembling, John Druten stood and listened. There was no sound of retreating footsteps; but outside, strangely, the wind had risen again. It howled about the walls of the ancient church with a sound like the crying of damned souls. . . .

All that night John Druten tossed fitfully in his bed, and dawn did not lessen his fears.

He fled from the house when the charwoman came to wash the breakfast dishes and tidy up. He did not dare to face her, fearing she might detect the madness in his eyes. He fled down into the streets of the village; there he met many of his acquaintances and sometimes he talked to them. But he did not talk to any long; for it seemed to him that they must hear the whisper of madness in his voice. It seemed to him that already they looked at him strangely, and he thought that when he walked on, sly smiles followed him.

At last the village he had always loved was grown intolerable to him, and he returned to his home and his study. The woman had gone; he could sit here in quiet peace, with no other eyes upon him.

With no eyes upon him? Why then was there that strange prickling sensation in his back? Had the thing grown so bold that it was come back to watch him in the broad light of day?

Absurdity! If he let such thoughts gain hold of him, he would indeed go mad. As it was, he was sane. He was quite sane, and had only suffered from an unusually acute nightmare. . . .

But why, then, had the little carved box, passed down to him by countless generations of holy men, which contained the relics of Saint George, been moved from its usual resting-place? Why did the dust upon it seem to have been disturbed by a human hand? Why, it even looked as if the lock had been tampered with, the box broken into!

Absurd! He was seeing things!

Well, then, why did he not open the book, the chronicle of the monks of Wenley? He knew the page; and one look would settle the matter. He would find nothing written there, which would prove that he had been suffering from a nightmare.

He moved forward, then stopped; for in his mind was the thought that perhaps he *would* find something written there. And if he did, there could be but one answer.

He stood a long time irresolute, his hand half lifted to the book. In that one move lay the answer to his sanity; yet he dared not make the move. At last he turned away.

But this battle with himself was not finished. It had become the all-important thing in his life. All afternoon it raged, and John Druten paced the floor of his study, now walking toward the book, now turning away. Once he sat down at his desk and wrote in his diary an account of the events of the night before; for he felt that if insanity or death were about to overtake him, his friends must know this much of his story. Then he resumed his pacing.

It was not till dusk had fallen that he at last decided. "Perhaps I am mad," he reasoned with himself; "perhaps I am

sane. If so, I shall go mad before the night is over if I do not know. . . ."

This time he walked steadily to the desk and picked up the book in his hands. With fingers that trembled, he turned the pages until he came to the one whereon the dread words must be written.

Not until he had turned a dozen pages on either side did he dare believe what his eyes told him. Then he sat down limply in the chair, and his face shone with joy. For the page was empty!

After a moment, the hysteria of relief seized him. He began to chuckle, first quietly, then more loudly, until at last the walls of the room rang with his laughter. Tears streamed down his cheeks, so great was his joy.

"Ho, ho!" he cried. "Well, Brother Lucifer! You surely gave me a fright. Indeed I have studied too much, and thought too long upon these ancient chronicles—till now I must needs be seeing the dead rise in my dreams! . . ."

His laughter slowly subsided; the room was still again. He stiffened, strained his ears. What was that sound he had heard which seemed to come from about the church and the spot where the abbey had once stood?

It was a sound as of a suddenly risen wind when no wind was blowing elsewhere—but there was in it more than the wind. . . .

Trembling and pale, John Druten tried to shut out from his ears that other sound that he knew must follow; yet, silent as it was, he could not keep it out. Now they were coming up the staircase—slow, whispering footsteps which held in them infinite menace.

With a powerful effort, the vicar rose from his chair, walked slowly around the desk and took his stand with one hand near the holy relic. It was too late now to attempt to light the lamp, for already the steps were crossing the living-room. It was not too late, perhaps, to flee from this cursed place into the street, but he could not flee. So great was his fear that he had barely been able to make that one slight move. Now he could only stand rooted to the spot, waiting. . . .

The steps reached the doorway, paused, then came on. And John Druten, knowing though he did what it was that came, stepped back in horror when he saw it.

He knew then that death faced him, and something far more horrible than death—something that went beyond the grave, that clutched at his soul and would give him no peace through all eternity. Yet he stood waiting, unable to defend himself or to cry out.

When it was half-way across the room, words came from the grayness.

"You spoke my name," it said, and there was in the voice something of the sound the wind had held. "You spoke my name; hence I was able to return, stronger, more alive than before.

"It is a pity," the gray shape added, "that the ink in which I wrote last night did not survive. I must write now in stronger ink."

It moved slowly forward, one hand upraised. Seeing that hand and its intent, John Druten at last found voice.

"Stop!" he screamed.

The shape came on, ignoring his command. So slowly it moved that it seemed it must take a century to cross the little room; yet its movement was certain and sure. . . .

"But that alone," it said, "will not suffice. I am not one to forgive, John Druten. Last night you might have given me a new life in death; instead, you sent me back to the dank tomb. For that, you shall have a fate more fearful than was mine. You shall die horribly; and beyond death, horribly you shall live. . . ."

It was almost upon Druten now in its deathly slow advance. Summoning all the force of his ebbing will-power, the vicar forced his hand down to seize the box which sat near it. Again he raised it high.

"Stop!" he cried. "In the name of Saint——"

Laughter drowned his words. "There are things I am able to learn that you cannot," said the shape, "and one such is that your box is useless. Some one of your predecessors was but prey to a scheming vender. There are no true relics in the box. Throw it if you will. . . ."

With all the power he possessed, Druten threw the box full into the awful face. But he knew even as he threw it that the voice spoke truth. The box seemed to thud against the face; yet the shape came on.

Its slow advance was ended. . . .

John Druten screamed. He called upon God and Christ and all the saints to aid him. But he felt the walls of Hell sweeping in upon him. And he knew that he slipped down into blackness beyond which lay awful and eternal torment.

He heard Brother Lucifer laugh. . . .

When all sound in the room had quieted, a figure came up from the floor, seeming almost to flow from the writhing mass that lay there. It might have been John Druten, for the clothes it wore were his and the hands were his; but the face was not. The evil glittering in its eyes, as it moved soundlessly from the room, could never have shone in the eyes of John Druten.

Yet Druten was gone, and on the floor at the spot where he had stood lay but a mound of moldering cloths: the gray robes and cowl of a cenobite, so attired and old that they should have been under ground these seven centuries and more. Inside them no body lay, but only a thick and moldering dust, and a nail, and a strand of hair, and something that might have been a crumbling bone. . . .

Only these things in the room, and on the desk an opened book with pages that gleamed redly now, and a dusty, waiting silence. No sight or thought was there of John Druten's body or of his soul; but outside where ruined masonry encompassed a moonlit space, there where once had Wenley Abbey stood, a new wind moaned. Its sound held the note of a lost soul crying, and it rose higher with each moment, as if with each moment more aware of its awful fate.

Thus must the wind at Wenley Abbey moan for evermore. . . .

Pickman's Model*

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

YOU needn't think I'm crazy, Eliot—plenty of others have queerer prejudices than this. Why don't you laugh at Oliver's grandfather, who won't ride in a motor? If I don't like that damned subway, it's my own business; and we got here more quickly anyhow in the taxi. We'd have had to walk up the hill from Park Street if we'd taken the car.

I know I'm more nervous than I was when you saw me last year, but you don't need to hold a clinic over it. There's plenty of reason, God knows, and I fancy I'm lucky to be sane at all. Why the third degree? You didn't use to be so inquisitive.

Well, if you must hear it, I don't know why you shouldn't. Maybe you ought to, anyhow, for you kept writing me like a grieved parent when you heard I'd begun to cut the Art Club and keep away from Pickman. Now that he's disappeared I go around to the club once in a while, but my nerves aren't what they were.

No, I don't know what's become of Pickman, and I don't like to guess. You might have surmised I had some inside information when I dropped him—and that's why I don't want to think where he's gone. Let the police find what they can—it won't be much, judging from the fact that they don't know yet of the old North End place he hired under the name of Peters. I'm not sure that I could find it again myself—not that I'd ever try, even in broad daylight! Yes, I do know, or am afraid I know, why he maintained it. I'm coming to that. And I think you'll understand before I'm through why I don't tell the police. They would ask me to guide them, but I couldn't go back there even if I knew the way. There was something there—and now I can't use the subway or (and you may as well have your laugh at this, too) go down into cellars any more.

I should think you'd have known I didn't drop Pickman for the same silly reasons that fussy old women like Doctor Reid or Joe Minot or Bosworth did. Morbid art doesn't shock me, and when a man has the genius Pickman had I feel it an honor to know him, no matter what direction his work takes. Boston never had a greater painter than Richard Upton

* From WEIRD TALES for October, 1927.

Pickman. I said it at first and I say it still, and I never swerved an inch, either, when he showed that *Ghoul Feeding*. That, you remember, was when Minot cut him.

You know, it takes profound art and profound insight into nature to turn out stuff like Pickman's. Any magazine-cover hack can splash paint around wildly and call it a nightmare or *Witches' Sabbath* or a portrait of the devil, but only a great painter can make such a thing really scare or ring true. That's because only a real artist knows the actual anatomy of the terrible or the physiology of fear—the exact sort of lines and proportions that connect up with latent instincts or hereditary memories of fright, and the proper color contrasts and lighting effects to stir the dormant sense of strangeness. I don't have to tell you why a Fuseli really brings a shiver while a cheap ghost-story frontispiece merely makes us laugh. There's something those fellows catch—beyond life—that they're able to make us catch for a second. Doré had it. Sime has it. Angarola of Chicago had it. And Pickman had it as no man ever had it before or—I hope to heaven—ever will again.

Don't ask me what it is they see. You know, in ordinary art, there's all the difference in the world between the vital, breathing things drawn from nature or models and the artificial truck that commercial small fry reel off in a bare studio by rule. Well, I should say that the really weird artist has a kind of vision which makes models, or summons up what amounts to actual scenes from the spectral world he lives in. Anyhow, he manages to turn out results that differ from the pretender's mince-pie dreams in just about the same way that the life painter's results differ from the concoctions of a correspondence-school cartoonist. If I had ever seen what Pickman saw—but no! Here, let's have a drink before we get any deeper. Gad, I wouldn't be alive if I'd ever seen what that man—if he was a man—saw!

You recall that Pickman's forte was faces. I don't believe anybody since Goya could put so much of sheer hell into a set of features or a twist of expression. And before Goya you have to go back to the mediæval chaps who did the gargoyles and chimeras on Notre Dame and Mont Saint-Michel. They believed all sorts of things—and maybe they saw all sorts of things, too, for the Middle Ages had some curious phases. I remember your asking Pickman yourself once, the year before you went away, wherever in thunder he got such ideas and visions. Wasn't that a nasty laugh he gave you? It was partly because of that laugh that Reid dropped him. Reid, you know, had just taken up comparative pathology, and was full of pompous "inside stuff" about the biological or evolutionary significance of this or that mental or physical symptom. He said Pickman repelled him more and more every day, and almost frightened him toward the last—that the fellow's features and expression were slowly developing in a way he didn't like; in a way that wasn't human. He had a lot of talk about diet, and said Pickman must be abnormal and eccentric to the last degree. I suppose you told Reid, if you and he had any correspondence over it, that he'd let Pickman's paintings get on his nerves or harrow up his imagination. I know I told him that myself—then.

But keep in mind that I didn't drop Pickman for anything like this. On the contrary, my admiration for him kept growing; for that *Ghoul Feeding* was a tremendous achievement. As you know, the club wouldn't exhibit it, and the Museum of Fine Arts wouldn't accept it as a gift; and I can add that nobody would buy it, so Pickman had it right in his

house till he went. Now his father has it in Salem—you know Pickman comes of old Salem stock, and had a witch ancestor hanged in 1692.

I GOT into the habit of calling on Pickman quite often, especially after I began making notes for a monograph on weird art. Probably it was his work which put the idea into my head, and anyhow, I found him a mine of data and suggestions when I came to develop it. He showed me all the paintings and drawings he had about, including some pen-and-ink sketches that would, I verily believe, have got him kicked out of the club if many of the members had seen them. Before long I was pretty nearly a devotee, and would listen for hours like a schoolboy to art theories and philosophic speculations wild enough to qualify him for the Danvers asylum. My hero-worship, coupled with the fact that people generally were commencing to have less and less to do with him, made him get very confidential with me; and one evening he hinted that if I were fairly close-mouthed and none too squeamish, he might show me something rather unusual —something a bit stronger than anything he had in the house.

"You know," he said, "there are things that won't do for Newbury Street—things that are out of place here, and that can't be conceived here, anyhow. It's my business to catch the overtones of the soul, and you won't find those in a parvenu set of artificial streets on made land. Back Bay isn't Boston—it isn't anything yet, because it's had no time to pick up memories and attract local spirits. If there are any ghosts here, they're the tame ghosts of a salt marsh and a shallow cove; and I want human ghosts—the ghosts of beings highly organized enough to have looked on hell and known the meaning of what they saw.

"The place for an artist to love is the North End. If any esthete were sincere, he'd put up with the slums for the sake of the massed traditions. God, man! Don't you realize that places like that weren't merely *made*, but actually *grew?* Generation after generation lived and felt and died there, and in days when people weren't afraid to live and feel and die. Don't you know there was a mill on Copp's Hill in 1632, and that half the present streets were laid out by 1650? I can show you houses that have stood two centuries and a half and more; houses that have witnessed what would make a modern house crumble into powder. What do moderns know of life and the forces behind it? You call the Salem witchcraft a delusion, but I'll wager my four-times-great-grandmother could have told you things. They hanged her on Gallows Hill, with Cotton Mather looking sanctimoniously on. Mather, damn him, was afraid somebody might succeed in kicking free of this accursed cage of monotony—I wish someone had laid a spell on him or sucked his blood in the night!

"I can show you a house he lived in, and I can show you another one he was afraid to enter in spite of all his fine bold talk. He knew things he didn't dare put into that stupid *Magnalia* or that puerile *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Look here, do you know the whole North End once had a set of tunnels that kept certain people in touch with each other's houses, and the burying-ground, and the sea? Let them prosecute and persecute above ground—things went on every day that they couldn't reach, and voices laughed at night that they couldn't place!

"Why, man, out of ten surviving houses built before 1700 and not moved since, I'll wager that in eight I can show you something queer in the cellar. There's hardly a month that you don't read of

workmen finding bricked-up arches and wells leading nowhere in this or that old place as it comes down—you could see one near Henchman Street from the elevated last year. There were witches and what their spells summoned; pirates and what they brought in from the sea; smugglers; privateers—and I tell you, people knew how to live, and how to enlarge the bounds of life, in the old times! This wasn't the only world a bold and wise man could know—faugh! And to think of today in contrast, with such pale-pink brains that even a club of supposed artists gets shudders and convulsions if a picture goes beyond the feelings of a Beacon Street tea-table!

"The only saving grace of the present is that it's too damned stupid to question the past very closely. What do maps and records and guide-books really tell of the North End? Bah! At a guess I'll guarantee to lead you to thirty or forty alleys and networks of alleys north of Prince Street that aren't suspected by ten living beings outside of the foreigners that swarm them. And what do those Dagoes know of their meaning? No, Thurber, these ancient places are dreaming gorgeously and overflowing with wonder and terror and escape from the commonplace, and yet there's not a living soul to understand or profit by them. Or, rather, there's only one living soul—for I haven't been digging around in the past for nothing!

"See here, you're interested in this sort of thing. What if I told you that I've got another studio up there, where I can catch the night-spirit of antique horror and paint things that I couldn't even think of in Newbury Street? Naturally I don't tell those cursed old maids at the club—with Reid, damn him, whispering even as it is that I'm a sort of monster bound down the toboggan of reverse evolution. Yes, Thurber, I decided long ago that one must paint terror as well as beauty from life, so I did some exploring in places where I had reason to know terror lives.

"I've got a place that I don't believe three living Nordic men besides myself have ever seen. It isn't so very far from the elevated as distance goes, but it's centuries away as the soul goes. I took it because of the queer old brick well in the cellar—one of the sort I told you about. The shack's almost tumbling down, so that nobody else would live there, and I'd hate to tell you how little I pay for it. The windows are boarded up, but I like that all the better, since I don't want daylight for what I do. I paint in the cellar, where the inspiration is thickest, but I've other rooms furnished on the ground floor. A Sicilian owns it, and I've hired it under the name of Peters.

"Now if you're game, I'll take you there tonight. I think you'd enjoy the pictures, for as I said, I've let myself go a bit there. It's no vast tour—I sometimes do it on foot, for I don't want to attract attention with a taxi in such a place. We can take the shuttle at the South Station for Battery Street, and after that the walk isn't much."

WELL, Eliot, there wasn't much for me to do after that harangue but to keep myself from running instead of walking for the first vacant cab we could sight. We changed to the elevated at the South Station, and at about twelve o'clock had climbed down the steps at Battery Street and struck along the old waterfront past Constitution Wharf. I didn't keep track of the cross streets, and can't tell you yet which it was we turned up, but I know it wasn't Greenough Lane.

When we did turn, it was to climb through the deserted length of the oldest and dirtiest alley I ever saw in my life,

with crumbling-looking gables, broken small-paned windows, and archaic chimneys that stood out half-disintegrated against the moonlit sky. I don't believe there were three houses in sight that hadn't been standing in Cotton Mather's time—certainly I glimpsed at least two with an overhang, and once I thought I saw a peaked roof-line of the almost forgotten pre-gambrel type, though antiquarians tell us there are none left in Boston.

From that alley, which had a dim light, we turned to the left into an equally silent and still narrower alley with no light at all; and in a minute made what I think was an obtuse-angled bend toward the right in the dark. Not long after this Pickman produced a flashlight and revealed an antediluvian ten-paneled door that looked damnably worm-eaten. Unlocking it, he ushered me into a barren hallway with what was once splendid dark-oak paneling — simple, of course, but thrillingly suggestive of the times of Andros and Phips and the witchcraft. Then he took me through a door on the left, lighted an oil lamp, and told me to make myself at home.

Now, Eliot, I'm what the man in the street would call fairly "hard-boiled," but I'll confess that what I saw on the walls of that room gave me a bad turn. They were his pictures, you know—the ones he couldn't paint or even show in Newbury Street — and he was right when he said he had "let himself go." Here—have another drink—I need one anyhow!

There's no use in my trying to tell you what they were like, because the awful, the blasphemous horror and the unbelievable loathsomeness and moral fetor came from simple touches quite beyond the power of words to classify. There was none of the exotic technique you see in Sidney Sime, none of the trans-Saturnian landscapes and lunar fungi that Clark Ashton Smith uses to freeze the blood. The backgrounds were mostly old churchyards, deep woods, cliffs by the sea, brick tunnels, ancient paneled rooms, or simple vaults of masonry. Copp's Hill Burying-Ground, which could not be many blocks away from this very house, was a favorite scene.

The madness and monstrosity lay in the figures in the foreground—for Pickman's morbid art was pre-eminently one

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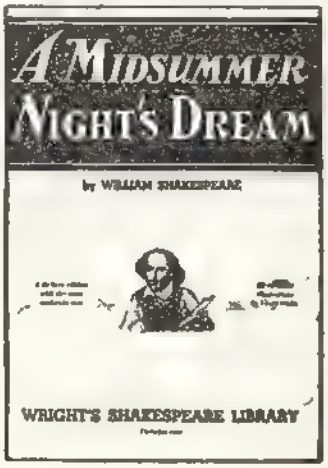

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of demoniac portraiture. These figures were seldom completely human, but often approached humanity in varying degrees. Most of the bodies, while roughly bipedal, had a forward-slumping and a vaguely canine cast. The texture of the majority was a kind of unpleasant rubberiness. Ugh! I can see them now! Their occupations—well, don't ask me to be too precise. They were usually feeding—I won't say on what. They were sometimes shown in groups in cemeteries or underground passages, and often appeared to be in battle over their prey—or rather, their treasure-trove. And what damnable expressiveness Pickman sometimes gave the sightless faces of this charnel booty! Occasionally the things were shown leaping through open windows at night, or squatting on the chests of sleepers, worrying at their throats. One canvas showed a ring of them baying about a hanged witch on Gallows Hill, whose dead face held a close kinship to theirs.

But don't get the idea that it was all this hideous business of theme and setting which struck me faint. I'm not a three-year-old kid, and I'd seen much like this before. It was the *faces,* Eliot, those accursed *faces,* that leered and slavered out of the canvas with the very breath of life! By heaven, man, I verily believe they *were* alive! That nauseous wizard had waked the fires of hell in pigment, and his brush had been a nightmare-spawning wand. Give me that decanter, Eliot!

There was one thing called *The Lesson* —heaven pity me, that I ever saw it! Listen—can you fancy a squatting circle of nameless dog-like things in a churchyard teaching a small child how to feed like themselves? The price of a changeling, I suppose—you know the old myth about how the weird people leave their spawn in cradles in exchange for the human babes they steal. Pickman was showing what happens to those stolen babes—how they grow up—and then I began to see a hideous relationship in the faces of the human and non-human figures. He was, in all his gradation of morbidity between the frankly non-human and the degradedly human, establishing a sardonic linkage and evolution. The dog-things were developed from mortals!

And no sooner had I wondered what he made of their own young as left with mankind in the form of changelings, than my eye caught a picture embodying that very thought. It was that of an ancient Puritan interior — a heavily beamed room with lattice windows, a settle, and clumsy Seventeenth Century furniture, with the family sitting about while the father read from the Scriptures. Every face but one showed nobility and reverence, but that one reflected the mockery of the pit. It was that of a young man in years, and no doubt belonged to a supposed son of that pious father, but in essence it was the kin of the unclean things. It was their changeling—and in a spirit of supreme irony Pickman had given the features a very perceptible resemblance to his own.

By this time Pickman had lighted a lamp in an adjoining room and was politely holding open the door for me, asking me if I would care to see his "modern studies". I hadn't been able to give him much of my opinions—I was too speechless with fright and loathing—but I think he fully understood and felt highly complimented. And now I want to assure you again, Eliot, that I'm no mollycoddle to scream at anything which shows a bit of departure from the usual. I'm not easily knocked out. Remember, too, that I'd just about recovered my wind and gotten used to those frightful pictures which turned Colonial New England into a kind of annex of hell. Well,

in spite of all this, that next room forced a real scream out of me, and I had to clutch at the doorway to keep from keeling over. The other chamber had shown a pack of ghouls and witches overrunning the world of our forefathers, but this one brought the horror right into our own daily life!

Gad, how that man could paint! There was a study called *Subway Accident*, in which a flock of the vile things were clambering up from some unknown catacomb through a crack in the floor of the Boylston Street subway and attacking a crowd of people on the platform. Another showed a dance on Copp's Hill among the tombs with the background of today. Then there were any number of cellar views, with monsters creeping in through holes and rifts in the masonry and grinning as they squatted behind barrels or furnaces and waited for their first victim to descend the stairs.

One disgusting canvas seemed to depict a vast cross-section of Beacon Hill, with ant-like armies of the mephitic monsters squeezing themselves through burrows that honeycombed the ground. Dances in the modern cemeteries were freely pictured, and another conception somehow shocked me more than all the rest—a scene in an unknown vault, where scores of the beasts crowded about one who held a well-known Boston guidebook and was evidently reading aloud. All were pointing to a certain passage, and every face seemed so distorted with epileptic and reverberant laughter that I almost thought I heard the fiendish echoes. The title of the picture was, *Holmes, Lowell and Longfellow Lie Buried in Mount Auburn.*

As I gradually steadied myself and got readjusted to this second room of deviltry and morbidity, I began to analyze some of the points in my sickening loathing.

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In the first place, I said to myself, these things repelled because of the utter inhumanity and callous cruelty they showed in Pickman. The fellow must be a relentless enemy of all mankind to take such glee in the torture of brain and flesh and the degradation of the moral tenement. In the second place, they terrified because of their very greatness. Their art was the art that convinced—when we saw the pictures we saw the demons themselves and were afraid of them. And the queer part was, that Pickman got none of his power from the use of selectiveness or bizarrerie. Nothing was blurred, distorted, or conventionalized; outlines were sharp and life-like, and details were almost painfully defined. And the faces!

It was not any mere artist's interpretation that we saw; it was pandemonium itself, crystal-clear in stark objectivity. That was it, by heaven! The man was not a fantaisiste or romanticist at all—he did not even try to give us the churning, prismatic ephemera of dreams, but coldly and sardonically reflected some stable, mechanistic and well-established horror-world which he saw fully, brilliantly, squarely and unfalteringly. God knows what that world can have been, or where he ever glimpsed the blasphemous shapes that loped and trotted and crawled through it; but whatever the baffling source of his images, one thing was plain. Pickman was in every sense—in conception and in execution—a thorough, painstaking, and almost scientific *realist*.

My host was now leading the way down-cellar to his actual studio, and I braced myself for some hellish effects among the unfinished canvases. As we reached the bottom of the damp stairs he turned his flashlight to a corner of the large open space at hand, revealing the circular brick curb of what was evidently a great well in the earthen floor. We walked nearer, and I saw that it must be five feet across, with walls a good foot thick and some six inches above the ground level—solid work of the Seventeenth Century, or I was much mistaken. That, Pickman said, was the kind of thing he had been talking about—an aperture of the network of tunnels that used to undermine the hill. I noticed idly that it did not seem to be bricked up, and that a heavy disk of wood formed the apparent cover. Thinking of the things this well must have been connected with if Pickman's wild hints had not been mere rhetoric, I shivered slightly; then turned to follow him up a step and through a narrow door into a room of fair size, provided with a wooden floor and furnished as a studio. An acetylene gas outfit gave the light necessary for work.

The unfurnished pictures on easels or propped against the walls were as ghastly as the finished ones upstairs, and showed the painstaking methods of the artist. Scenes were blocked out with extreme care, and penciled guide-lines told of the minute exactitude which Pickman used in getting the right perspective and proportions. The man was great—I say it even now, knowing as much as I do. A large camera on a table excited my notice, and Pickman told me that he used it in taking scenes for backgrounds, so that he might paint them from photographs in the studio instead of carting his outfit around the town for this or that view. He thought a photograph quite as good as an actual scene or model for sustained work, and declared he employed them regularly.

There was something very disturbing about the nauseous sketches and half-finished monstrosities that leered around from every side of the room, and when Pickman suddenly unveiled a huge canvas on the side away from the light I could not for my life keep back a loud scream—the second I had emitted that night. It

echoed and re-echoed through the dim vaultings of that ancient and nitrous cellar, and I had to choke back a flood of reaction that threatened to burst out as hysterical laughter. Merciful Creator, Eliot, but I don't know how much was real and how much was feverish fancy! It doesn't seem to me that earth can hold a dream like that!

It was a colossal and nameless blasphemy with glaring red eyes, and it held in bony claws a thing that had been a man, gnawing at the head as a child nibbles at a stick of candy. Its position was a kind of crouch, and as one looked one felt that at any moment it might drop its present prey and seek a juicier morsel. But, damn it all, it wasn't even the fiendish subject that made it such an immortal fountain-head of all panic—not that, nor the dog face with its pointed ears, bloodshot eyes, flat nose, and drooling lips. It wasn't the scaly claws nor the mold-caked body nor the half-hooved feet—none of these, though any one of them might well have driven an excitable man to madness.

It was the technique, Eliot—the cursed, the impious, the unnatural technique! As I am a living being, I never elsewhere saw the actual breath of life so fused into a canvas. The monster was there—it glared and gnawed and gnawed and glared—and I knew that only a suspension of nature's laws could ever let a man paint a thing like that without a model—without some glimpse of the nether world which no mortal unsold to the fiend has ever had.

Pinned with a thumb-tack to a vacant part of the canvas was a piece of paper, now badly curled up—probably, I thought, a photograph from which Pickman meant to paint a background as hideous as the nightmare it was to enhance. I reached out to uncurl and look at it,

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when suddenly I saw Pickman start as if shot. He had been listening with peculiar intensity ever since my shocked scream had waked unaccustomed echoes in the dark cellar, and now he seemed struck with a fright which, though not comparable to my own, had in it more of the physical than of the spiritual. He drew a revolver and motioned me to silence, then stepped out into the main cellar and closed the door behind him.

I think I was paralyzed for an instant. Imitating Pickman's listening, I fancied I heard a faint scurrying sound somewhere, and a series of squeals, or bleats, in a direction I couldn't determine. I thought of huge rats and shuddered. Then there came a subdued sort of clatter which somehow set me all in goose-flesh—a furtive, groping kind of clatter, though I can't attempt to convey what I mean in words. It was like heavy wood falling on stone or brick—wood on brick—what did that make me think of?

It came again, and louder. There was a vibration as if the wood had fallen farther than it had fallen before. After that followed a sharp grating noise, a shouted gibberish from Pickman, and the deafening discharge of all six chambers of a revolver, fired spectacularly as a lion-tamer might fire in the air for effect. A muffled squeal or squawk, and a thud. Then more wood and brick grating, a pause, and the opening of the door—at which I'll confess I started violently. Pickman reappeared with his smoking weapon, cursing the bloated rats that infested the ancient well.

"The deuce knows what they eat, Thurber," he grinned, "for those archaic tunnels touched graveyards and witch-den and seacoast. But whatever it is, they must have run short, for they were devilish anxious to get out. Your yelling stirred them up, I fancy. Better be cautious in these old places—our rodent friends are the one drawback, though I sometimes think they're a positive asset by way of atmosphere and color."

WELL, Eliot, that was the end of the night's adventure. Pickman had promised to show me the place, and heaven knows he had done it. He led me out of that tangle of alleys in another direction, it seems, for when we sighted a lamp-post we were in a half-familiar street with monotonous rows of mingled tenement blocks and old houses. Charter Street, it turned out to be, but I was too flustered to notice just where we hit it. We were too late for the elevated, and walked back downtown through Hanover Street. I remember that walk. We switched from Tremont up Beacon, and Pickman left me at the corner of Joy, where I turned off. I never spoke to him again.

Why did I drop him? Don't be impatient. Wait till I ring for coffee. We've had enough of the other stuff, but I for one need something. No—it wasn't the paintings I saw in that place; though I'll swear they were enough to get him ostracized in nine-tenths of the homes and clubs of Boston, and I guess you won't wonder now why I have to steer clear of subways and cellars. It was—something I found in my coat the next morning. You know, the curled-up paper tacked to that frightful canvas in the cellar; the thing I thought was a photograph of some scene he meant to use as a background for that monster. That last scare had come while I was reaching to uncurl it, and it seems I had vacantly crumpled it into my pocket. But here's the coffee—take it black, Eliot, if you're wise.

Yes, that paper was the reason I dropped Pickman; Richard Upton Pickman, the greatest artist I had ever known—and the foulest being that ever leaped

the bounds of life into the pits of myth and madness. Eliot, old Reid was right. He wasn't strictly human. Either he was born in strange shadow, or he'd found a way to unlock the forbidden gate. It's all the same now, for he's gone—back into the fabulous darkness he loved to haunt. Here, let's have the chandelier going.

Don't ask me to explain or even conjecture about what I burned. Don't ask me, either, what lay behind that mole-like scrambling that Pickman was so keen to pass off as rats. There are secrets, you know, which might have come down from old Salem times, and Cotton Mather tells even stranger things. You know how damned life-like Pickman's paintings were—how we all wondered where he got those faces.

Well—that paper wasn't a photograph of any background, after all. What it showed was simply the monstrous being he was painting on that awful canvas. It was the model he was using—and its background was merely the wall of the cellar studio in minute detail. But by heaven, Eliot, *it was a photograph from life.*

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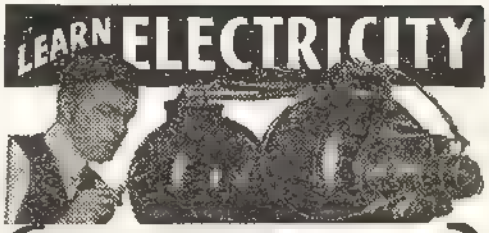

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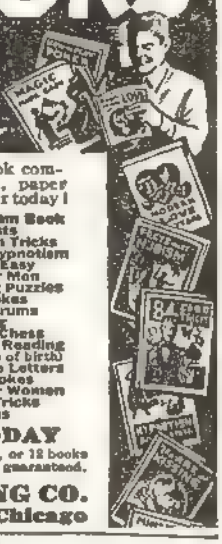

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Hours of Solid Enjoyment

Corwin Stickney, Jr., director of the Science-Fantasy Correspondence Club, writes from Belleville, New Jersey: "The August-September issue is quite satisfactory. In one of her rare moods, Brundage painted a truly weird cover. Her nudes, though they sometimes appear to have dieted too extensively, are attractive—but hardly weird. The best complete story this month is, undoubtedly, *Werewolf of the Sahara.* G. G. Pendarves is a *writer.* He has created a vivid story that I'll long remember. In my mind it is, as you say, a tremendous tale. Somehow I was disappointed with *The Door Into Infinity.* Something lacking, that's all. The story seemed to drag wofully in spots. Hamilton can, and will, do better. *The Medici Boots* is quite interesting, but far more interesting I found Virgil Finlay's peculiar and beautiful illustration for it. He's a really excellent artist; I hope you'll give him more than one story to illustrate in future issues. Other yarns—*Death Holds the Post, In the Dark, The Diary of Philip Westerly,* and *Four Wooden Stakes*—are uniformly good. The news of Robert E. Howard's death is indeed tragic. His outstanding character and exceptional writing talents were revealed in every one of his works; WT and every reader of weird fiction will sincerely mourn his abrupt passing. I shall miss especially his thrilling tales of the colorful Conan—one of the most endearing characters ever drawn. The two poems in this issue are very good. Especially enjoyable and spine-tingling was *Lycanthropus.* The idea behind it could have served very adequately as the plot of a short short-story. In general, you're doing excellently in your capacity as editor of WEIRD TALES. I am indeed grateful for the many hours of solid enjoyment I have derived from the reading of this fine publication. You are to be highly complimented, both on the excellence of your format, and on the high literary standard you have set, attained, and held."

Howard's Collected Works

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "Robert E. Howard's death is truly a great loss to our magazine, for he was one of the real masters of weird fiction. In view of his untimely departure from our material world, I suggest that you print a collection of his best works, selections to be made by the readers of WT. I also think that you might print a picture or sketch of Mr. Howard with a brief biography. Why do I think you should do this? Just because Robert E. Howard was one of the most popular writers WT ever had and probably ever will have. . . . It is not difficult to select the best story in the September issue. *The Medici Boots* by Pearl Norton Swet is without a doubt the number one tale for this month. It possesses real weirdness. I enjoyed it tremendously. Virgil Finlay's illus-

tration for this story is superb. *Death Holds the Post* by Derleth and Schorer contains an old plot, but is nevertheless done in fine style. The description of the cadavers in the outpost is excellent. *The Diary of Philip Westerly* and *In the Dark* are splendid short-shorts, and I like them better than a couple of the longer tales. *Four Wooden Stakes*, the reprint, is just an ordinary vampire tale, authored, evidently, by a novice in the field of writing. The story is too concise. Part 2 of *Red Nails* is very slaughterous, exciting, and extremely interesting. We are going to miss Conan, the barbarian. It's too bad that Mr. Howard didn't write a story in which his popular brain-child would be vanquished, so we could know how great a thing it would take to bring death to this superhuman, who has successfully defied death dealt at him by giants, armies, monstrosities, and magicians. When one sees the name of Edmond Hamilton beside the title of a story, he expects to find something worth reading; however, such is not the case with *The Door Into Infinity*. I am very much surprized that Mr. Hamilton would allow his name to be printed with such a story as this. It's just another cheap thriller—the kind that we readers have pleaded again and again for you to keep out of WT. Are you beginning to print this magazine with 'names' instead of stories? In spite of the numerous protests against publishing any more Doctor Satan adventures, you continue to print them. Why use precious space for tales the readers don't want? Mr. Ernst can write some real weird ones, if you'll just let him. He's a splendid author, has a good style, and I like to peruse his work; but I, for one, don't like such stuff as the Doctor Satan series. . . . I would like to see a Virgin Finlay illustration on the cover because I know there would be a touch of true weirdness to it. Next month's stories look like an all-star line-up. I hope they are as good as advance reports indicate."

Not a Pseudonym

Joseph Allan Ryan, of Cambridge, Maryland, writes: "Just wondering—is Thorp McClusky the pseudonym for another of your authors? Seems to me I've never heard of him before, but he took a time-worn plot and made a distinct and satisfying story out of it—a sort of summary of *Dracula*, leaving out the tiresomely dragging sections of the

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latter story. Very few authors can build a good story around a much-used theme—perhaps Seabury Quinn in weird fiction and the late Stanley G. Weinbaum in science-fiction. And no doubt 'Abdul Alhazred' Lovecraft could do the same; but I couldn't prove my statement, for Lovecraft always uses a new plot for his masterpieces. Where is Lovecraft these days, anyway? Is he taking a temporary vacation, or is he taking his time and writing a long serial novel? (Shades of Arlton Eadie!) Gertrude Hemken ran out of cute words in her latest effort and wrote something serious, for a change. Ah, Trudy, I never thought you'd let us down that way! We'd just as soon hear (God forbid!) Joe Penner delivering a scientific treatise. Go back to your old style and give us your baby-talk. I feel positively cheated—only one Finlay illustration in the August-September issue. Incidentally, why not give us a cover by Virgil? It wouldn't do any harm to try him once or twice—he *does* delve into oils now and then, you know. I don't mean for you to lay Mrs. Brundage off, by any means—she's swell—but variety is the spice of life, and even WT can use a little variety on the covers . . . . Your newest illustrator, Harold De Lay, is very good on the straight art work; but don't give him any of the particularly weird stuff to do until we know definitely whether or not we're going to like him. Why not give Virgil Finlay a story of Quinn's—a Jules de Grandin story, of course—to illustrate? Then we'd have a sort of collaboration between the two masters. Seabury Quinn would feel honored to have his work done by Finlay—and vice versa." [No, Thorp McClusky is not a pen name. It is the real name of a new writer. Two new stories by H. P. Lovecraft will appear right soon, and they are well worth waiting for. You ask that we have Virgil Finlay illustrate one of Seabury Quinn's de Grandin stories; he has done just that in this issue.—THE EDITOR.]

Twelve Years of Thinking

Margaret Warren, of Columbus, Ohio, writes in part: "This is my very first fan letter of any kind in my life, but I have read WEIRD TALES since I was eleven years old, when I had to sneak to the attic to do so. I am twenty-three now and an orphan. I am very shy and self-conscious and have always leaned on the heavy weird things and always wanted to know why about everything and no one knows how much WEIRD TALES has meant to me. I have just read about Robert E. Howard's death. What a pity! He was among your best. To think we never will have Conan again! How I always love him, and what a grand time! He has never a dull moment. *Red Nails* is grand, and of course I have saved all my back numbers. You should see the stacks of them. I read them over and love them. Now I must make a plea for my greatest hero, Doctor Jules de Grandin. I see that he is coming soon, and I can hardly wait. I sometimes wonder if there is anyone in the world like him? I don't think so. After all, we have Mr. Quinn to thank. . . . I must say something about Virgil Finlay's drawings. They are exquisite. The one in the August issue with *The Medici Boots* is wonderful, and also with *The Room of Shadows.* There is such a haunting look that it makes a lump in my throat and makes me wish for all the things that might have been and long to have lived when the world was young and dark things flew and crawled and man had to fight, not just exist. And while I am talking about drawings—I am so used to Margaret Brundage's lovely nudes on the covers that the magazine wouldn't be complete without them. I like the reprints because I am always thinking I missed something before I started reading WEIRD TALES. . . . If ever WEIRD TALES goes off the market I wouldn't know what to do the first of the month. . . . I think I have put twelve years of thinking into this letter and maybe some night when I am restless again I will sit in the dead of night and write you again."

Loot of the Vampire

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "The July WEIRD TALES was truly a fine issue. In my opinion *Loot of the Vampire* is best in the issue. McClusky has developed some interesting new ideas on the old vampire theme. Virgil Finlay's drawing for the second installment is one of the best weird illustrations I have yet seen. *Red Nails* and *Lost Paradise* vie for second honors. Once again we are privileged to roam through the wildernesses and cities of ancient, forgotten lands with Conan, the premier adventurer of all time. The new story starts out in a way that augurs well for fu-

ture installments. In Valeria, we have an ideal companion for the Cimmerian. And once again C. L. Moore puts a dream on paper—a lovely fantasy. Northwest Smith remains one of the greatest fiction characters yet created. Kayser's best yet was *The Unborn*, an unusual story, vividly and strikingly narrated. Clark Ashton Smith was at his best in his new tale of necromancy and dark magic. *When the World Slept* is an excellent and interesting variation on an old plot. The idea of the sleeping maiden as his companion was a good touch. *Kharu Knows All* was the best of this month's crop of ultra-shorts. . . . The Eyrie continues to be the most interesting readers' department in any magazine. I like the friendly little paragraph by the editor at the beginning of it."

Jules de Grandin

J. H. Hammond, of Alexandria, Virginia, writes: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES ever since the magazine has been published. I have never missed a copy yet. What has become of Seabury Quinn? When will we have one of his stories, with Jules de Grandin, published again? It does not seem like WEIRD TALES without him. *Loot of the Vampire* and *Red Nails* and *The Return of Sarah Purcell* are my favorite stories in the July issue. I do not like *Lost Paradise*. What I like is plain old-fashioned ghost stories, werewolf stories and vampire stories. I also like weird-scientific stories. So give us what we want." [Some more fine de Grandin stories will appear soon.—THE EDITOR.]

Child of the Winds

Aleta Doré, of New York City, writes: "Although I have never written to a magazine before and even now feel I am a month behind with my letter, I must tell you how much I enjoyed *Child of the Winds* by Edmond Hamilton. I thought it was delightful. Seabury Quinn's departure from his usual story of Jules de Grandin was also successful. I found the story most interesting."

A Disappointing Issue

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "It was with deep regret that I learned of Robert E. Howard's sudden and untimely death. A great favorite with all of us, I know that he and his work will always be remembered. His fertile imagina-

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tion, vivid depiction of the fantastic and literary style were the work of sheer genius. Farewell, Robert E. Howard. That you set your course by the stars, I have no doubt. We, the readers of WEIRD TALES, will never forget you. I was greatly disappointed with the August-September issue of WEIRD TALES, especially after the great job you turned out in July. It was by far the poorest number you have ever given us. *Red Nails* by Howard is excellent, one of his best, but I turn thumbs down on the balance of the issue."

With or Without Ghouls

Charles H. Bert, of Philadelphia, writes: "I noticed in the Eyrie Henry Kuttner's letter regarding my comments on his story, *The Graveyard Rats*, in which he believes his story was more convincing with the ghoul. I dislike to be too critical and fault-finding, but I think the story would have been more effective without the ghoul. He depicts in his story the dreadful hunger of the rats. Logically, if the rats were so, why didn't they attack the ghoul instead of the caretaker? The nature of rats is that they will eat anything when hungry. Also, Kuttner had built the horror sequence up to an admirable height and the inclusion of the ghoul added little to it. For a real study of gruesome horror, *Pickman's Model*, by Lovecraft, is unsurpassed. However, I liked Kuttner's story very much. . . . I am very sorry indeed to read about the sudden death of Robert E. Howard. I had a profound admiration for his work. His work had the subtle touch of genius and a fascinating, brilliant style. His stories, in your own words, 'fired the imagination by the compelling sweep of its fantasy and the strange power of its style.' The stories I recall that were his super-best were: *The Shadow Kingdom, Moon of Skulls, Kings of the Night, Gods of Bal Sagoth, Wings in the Night, The Black Stone, Worms of the Earth, The Scarlet Citadel*, and *A Witch Shall be Born*. In the historical line Howard was supreme; *The Sowers of the Thunder, Lord of Samarcand*, and *The Lion of Tiberias* were his best. In this triumvirate he has caught all the glamor, glory, richness, loves and hates of the ages they depicted. Howard is *irreplaceable*, I doubt if you ever will get another author like him. . . . I always enjoy oriental stories, and those you publish are fine beyond words. *Werewolf of the Sahara* was distinctively unique. No one but Pendarves would think of using the Sahara desert as a background for a werewolf story. Judging from her past stories and her present one, she knows the East as well as Price does. The struggle between good and evil reminded me of *The Devil's Graveyard* published over a decade ago. Belief in werewolves has existed more than two thousand years. The best weird oriental story I ever read in your magazine was *The Rajah's Gift*, the story of a man's pride which was so great that it killed him. I notice you are publishing more historical stories. Although *The Medici Boots* cannot be classified as one, nevertheless the author has woven the ancient past into the present and turned out an exceptionally fine story. *Red Nails* is developing splendidly. Compliments to Harold De Lay for his clever illustration. Finlay turned out a nice one too. His illustration is so real and life-like that it occurred to me that the blond Medici could speak. I am curious to know how a cover drawing would look by Finlay. What is this! I remember no request in the Eyrie for *Four Wooden Stakes*. There are so many fine yarns in the past issue that it causes me to wonder why you chose such a mediocre story for a reprint. *Whispering Tunnels* would have made a great reprint. Take this hint: by using a smaller type in your reprint department you can publish longer stories and make them more satisfying to the readers."

Robert E. Howard's Stories

Doctor John D. Clark, of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, writes: "I was very sorry to hear of the death of Robert E. Howard. He will be missed. He could write a weird adventure story in a way that no other author can approach. His stories were tightly written, convincing (at the time) and literate. Why not bring out some of his older stories, such as the King Kull stories, Solomon Kane, and those of the Irishman-Saxon team in book form? Many of the WEIRD TALES addicts such as myself would appreciate it. I don't mention the Conan stories because I already have collected all of them and have them bound. But unfortunately I was converted to your magazine after the time of the other stories, and have only heard enough about them to feel badly because I missed them! I shall not put in one of the usual lists of

stories I like and don't like. Heaven knows the job of an editor is bad enough without having to please everybody. In the first place, it can't be done. And in the second, I continue to buy the magazine, and to brag about it—you'd think I wrote it—to anybody who will listen, and to many who won't."

Our Eery Yarns

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "For the past two and one-half years WEIRD TALES has pleased me with its eery yarns of vampires, ghouls, monsters, barbarian adventurers, with its stories of science, rocket flights and alien dimensions; in fact I have liked practically every story you have printed. The August-September issue did not detract from your reputation of being The Unique Magazine but added to it. G. G. Pendarves' *Werewolf of the Sahara* is the story which appeals most to me in the current issue. Robert E. Howard's Conan adventure takes second place. Weird fiction has lost one of its best authors in the death of Howard."

Long-Winded? No Indeed!

Ian C. Knox writes from London, England: "Congratulations and condolences. The latter on the death of Robert E. Howard; the congratulations on his two serials. In my humble opinion he was your best author. Here is a suggestion as tribute—canvass your readers and I am sure they will agree. Publish the best of his Conan stories in book form, in two volumes (cover, of course, by Brundage). . . . In this form they will take up less room than the stacks of magazines. I don't know about his other heroes. I missed Kull and Solomon Kane (through not knowing of your existence then), and Turlogh O'Brien seems to me a rather inferior Conan. . . . Not counting Howard, the six authors whom I want most to read in your pages are, in order: Otis Adelbert Kline, C. L. Moore, Seabury Quinn, Edmond Hamilton, Clark Ashton Smith, and Carl Jacobi. By the way, isn't it time you got something more out of Kline, or has he given up writing? And what about a series (serials and shorts) by Hamilton about his world of Kaldar? Please excuse this long-windedness; but I do not bombard you with letters once a month like some of your readers, and only write up very occasionally. Consequently, when I do, I have a lot to say."

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Short Comments

Earl Peirce, Jr., of Washington, D. C., writes: "Have read and enjoyed the July WT. By all means continue with August Derleth's monthly ghost story. And I would like to see more of Henry Kuttner's work in your magazine. He writes splendid ballads, and his graveyard-rat story, including the 'fourth at bridge,' was one of the better yarns. I enjoyed Wellman's *The Kelpie* and Bodo Wildberg's *The Snakeskin Cigar-Case.* Your short stories of late have been veritable gems. They are not 'fillers,' but fillings."

Therese Ericsson, of Hasselfors, Sweden, writes: "I have just received the March copy of your magazine from London, but I do not find its contents quite so fascinating as it used to be. There is too much of the end of the world in it, and the grave rats was a horrid story without being fascinating."

Bruce Bryan, of Washington, D. C., writes: "Let me congratulate the author of *Loot of the Vampire* for turning out a magnificent vampire tale—new in every respect, as far as I'm concerned, grandly illustrated, and making you roll every word over and over on your tongue to be sure of getting the last juicy drop of taste out of it. In the words of Nyarlathotep, 'It was swell!' "

John V. Baltadonis, of Philadelphia, writes: "Excluding *Red Nails* from consideration, as I do not read the serials until they are completed, the best story in the September issue was G. G. Pendarves' thrilling tale, *Werewolf of the Sahara.* Paul Ernst's Doc Satan yarn and Edmond Hamilton's *Door Into Infinity* are tied for second place. . . . Glad to see that WEIRD TALES will appear on the news stands dated a month ahead of time, as in the old days."

Henry Kuttner writes from his home in Beverly Hills, California: "Nice cover on the September WT, although I don't like pug-nosed heroines. But, frankly, on the whole the issue seemed somehow lacking in *weirdness.* Maybe the absence of the bogeyboys—Bloch and Smith and Lovecraft—accounted for that. I liked Kayser's story for the very clever twist at the end."

Louis C. Smith, of Oakland, California, writes: "Edmond Hamilton was good, as always, in the last issue, with *The Door Into Infinity.* But I'd still relish some of his old Interstellar Patrol stories. G. G. Pendarves is just about the master of his subject, to my way of thinking. You can't go wrong on him. And I still think Mrs. Brundage's nudes are great stuff; they are better than any of the cruder things you used to run on the covers."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write us a letter, or fill out the coupon below, and send it to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. The most popular story in the August-September issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the second part of the late Robert E. Howard's serial, *Red Nails.* This was closely followed by *Werewolf of the Sahara,* by G. G. Pendarves.

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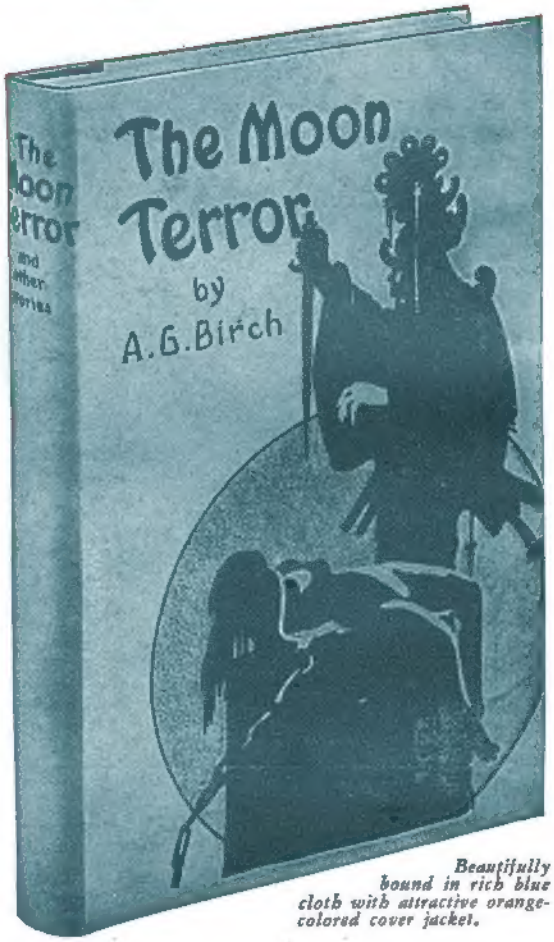

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